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THE BATTLES OF LIFE.

THE IRONMASTER.

VOL. II.



THE BATTLES OF LIFE.

THE IRONMASTER.

FROM THE FRENCH OF

GEORGES OHNET,

AUTHOR OF

“LA COMTESSE SARAH,” “LISE FLEURON,” ETC. ETC.

By LADY G. O.

AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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THE IRONMASTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE Château of La Varenne is one of the most beautiful feudal constructions still left in France. Built by Enguerand d'Estrelles, who made himself illustrious at Bouvines by rescuing the King Philippe-Auguste, when hurled from his horse by a Flemish pikeman, he had the honour of receiving under his lead-covered roofs and pointed towers, the Emperor Charles-Quint, on his way to the siege of Nancy.

Overthrown by the cannon-balls of

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Turenne, during an attack that the celebrated Marshal made upon the Imperialists, before commencing his sanguinary and savage campaign in the Palatinate, the donjon of La Varenne remained in ruins during the reigns of Louis XV. and of Louis XVI.

The Revolution passed harmlessly over its ruins. No more harm could be done to it. The Citizens of Besançon confined themselves to cutting down the lofty trees for firewood, and to stealing the stonework in order to build houses. The mansion, worked like a quarry, furnished materials for more than twenty habitations. A dealer in old iron also carried away more than six hundred thousand pounds of lead, taken from the roof, and shamelessly sold it. This was a mine of wealth to him.

The d'Estrelles, having departed with

the Comte d'Artois, were not on the spot to protest against these depredations. They were discharging fire-arms before Mayence, and sabring, with that fiery ardour which gained Fontenoy, the hussars of Biron and the grenadiers of Pichegru. The organized robberies, of which the whole country was the accomplice, saved, — whimsical result, — the d'Estrelles from ruin. Never was the Commune of Besançon able to sell the estates of La Varenne as National property. No one would have dared to buy the domain, from dread of the ill-will of the peasants and of the inhabitants of the town, accustomed to plunder it like a conquered country.

Under the Directory, the d'Estrelles, thanks to the protection of Barras, were able to return to France. They found their estates pillaged, but free, and they

installed themselves in a guard-house, in which they were able to replace the doors and windows. With the remnant of their patrimony, carefully administered during the whole duration of the Empire, they reconstructed a fortune. And, in the first days of the Restoration, they reappeared in Paris, and succeeded in making a figure there. Under the Monarchy of July, the last of the d'Estrelles married the daughter, enriched by an income of two hundred thousand francs, of the banker Claude Chrétien, quite recently created a Baron for services rendered to the Civil List.

This nobleman was possessed by a passion for antiquities. He caused to be reconstructed at heavy expense the Château of La Varenne, such as it was at the time of its splendour. The high walls, crowned by battlemented terraces, the

superb towers, with gargoyles fantastically sculptured, rose again above the tall trees of the park. The work lasted ten years and cost immense sums.

The furniture was replaced with exquisite taste. M. d'Estrelles, anticipating the fashion, bought old cabinets skilfully restored, mirrors with splendid frames, wood-work from churches, master-pieces of the sculptors of the *moyen âge*, and marvellous tapestries from Flanders. La Varenne became a veritable museum in which was accumulated all the art treasures of the Province, then disdained, but in the present day so ardently sought. That magnificent dwelling was a Paradise to the impassioned collector who was hoarding in it his treasures.

M. d'Estrelles at his death left this fine property, completely restored to its original condition, to his son, a young

Lieutenant in the Guides, already provided with a *conseil judiciaire*.* In four years the estate of La Varenne was mortgaged for two-thirds of its value. And the inestimable collection of works of art was about to be conveyed to Paris to be sold by auction, when M. Moulinet presented himself as a purchaser of the domain.

The trader, pursuing his project of a union between the Duke and his daughter, at first thought of redeeming the estate of Bligny in Touraine. But the patrimonial Château of his future son-in-law had fallen, after numerous proprietors, into the hands of a wealthy earthenware manufacturer of Blois, who disdained the very tempting offers of Moulinet. In default of Bligny, the father of Athénaïs had fallen back upon

* A person nominated to give certain legal assistance to a spendthrift.

La Varenne, and, all things considered, he found himself enchanted by his acquisition.

The vicinity of Beaulieu bewitched him. They would be living, thought he, *en famille*, and the relations of neighbourhood would become in course of time altogether friendly. Moulinet, the faithful instrument of the dark calculations that had guided his daughter in the choice of her future husband, but not measuring the full extent of the perfidy of Athénaïs, certainly expected to encounter on the part of the family of the Duke some resistance to his overtures. In short, Gaston ought to marry his cousin. But, with admirable independence of mind, the ambitious father chose to consider this betrothal as an amusing game of childhood. Gaston and Claire were little husband and little wife, at the age when the heart is ignorant of itself, and when

the character is without guidance. He did not admit that a deep attachment had been the result of this engagement contracted at the beginning of life, at least on the part of one of the betrothed.

He himself had been united by childish promises to the daughter, aged thirteen years, of a Joiner in the Rue de la Ferronnerie ; at that time he was a little assistant at the shop of a druggist in the Rue des Lombards. The daughter of the joiner, absolutely forgotten by him, married a butcher in the Place des Innocents. He one day had a glimpse of her, fat and red, her arms adorned by linen oversleeves, her shoulders covered with a tippet of Astrakhan, weighing cutlets in a large brass scale. And he, Moulinet, become a millionaire, inhabited a magnificent Hôtel on the Boulevard Malesherbes. What affinity could there be between a

Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce, and that butcher's wife glowing with health? Destiny had charged herself with wisely settling their foolish aspirations, and, by separating them, put them both in their true position. Was it not the same with Mademoiselle de Beaulieu and with the Duke?

United, they were inevitably condemned to a mean mediocrity. Sundered, each could withdraw admirably from the affair. The Duke married, Claire would not fail to find an establishment worthy of herself. He could even aid her in it, he, Moulinet, with all his power.

And then, in his mind, one argument dominated all others, it was that of his own good pleasure. He saw in the Duc de Bligny a son-in-law who suited him. It was not a man like himself, who had forced fortune, that could be prevented

from doing that which he pleased. He had determined that his daughter should be a Duchess, it must be so. And it was about to take place.

Moreover, the Château of La Varenne, through its majestic proportions, prodigiously flattered the vanity of Moulinet. The battlemented towers, the machicolations of its stone sentry-boxes, the solemn belfry where gravely sounded the hours, delighted this parvenu. Puffed up with pride, the enriched trader found himself in his right place in the lofty Salle des Gardes, upon the walls of which were painted the armorial bearings of all those allied by marriage to the old family of d'Estrelles. In the room, restored with scrupulous accuracy, where Charles-Quint had slept, Moulinet had the impudence to instal himself.

With unequalled satisfaction, the choco-

late-maker stretched his limbs in the same place where the Conqueror of Pavia had reposed. Having heard his chamber named by those familiar with the Château, the “apartment of the Emperor,” forgetting the recent restorations, the purchase of fresh furniture, he imagined that it was the same floor, the same walls, between which the great man had for a few hours lived, and that room he chose for his own.

In the bed, with massive posts, elevated upon a stately estrade, and hung with curtains in *point de Venice*, he pillowed his plebeian head. Never did he fail to say, with emphasis: “My clock was wound up, in former times, by Charles-Quint.” He believed implicitly that the great Emperor had all his life occupied himself in regulating time-pieces, as, later, did Saint-Just, to divert the melancholy that was consuming his vast mind.

Athénaïs herself, less accessible to the enjoyment of satisfied pride, saw in the Château only a menacing fortress, from which she could pounce upon her enemy. The greatest advantage of La Varenne, in her eyes, was that it raised its proud and splendid turrets hardly two leagues from Beaulieu. From thence she dominated the situation, and was able, in all security, to choose the hour when she would surely strike her whom she hated with all the strength of her being.

From the day after her installation, which had immediately followed the signature of the deed prepared by Bachelin, she was adroitly obtaining information. She discovered that the Baroness was with Claire. But one adversary more did not intimidate her. On the contrary, she rejoiced at the thought of triumphing over the haughty Mademoiselle de

Beaulieu, under the eyes of Madame de Préfont.

For three days, Moulinet and Athénaïs had inhabited the Château. After having made in detail and many times the tour of his park, of his kitchen-gardens, and of his out-buildings, the purchaser of La Varenne began to *ennuyer* himself furiously on his property, when a telegram brought by a messenger from the town, announced the coming of the Duke, whom they had not so soon expected.

This speedy arrival greatly vexed Athénaïs. The young girl feared that the Duke would be inclined to oppose her projects. It might enter into the mind of Gaston to treat with delicacy the natural susceptibilities of his family. And all that Mademoiselle Moulinet wished to attempt in order to wound Mademoiselle de Beaulieu would encounter on the part of the Duke

a forcible opposition. Athénaïs, therefore, took the resolution of acting before Bligny should be able to fetter her liberty. Her betrothed would arrive at La Varenne the same day at three o'clock. There was not a minute to lose.

Moulinet, still mechanically twisting in his fingers the telegram, was walking up and down in the beautiful flower-garden laid out after the French fashion, before the front of the Château, when his daughter, in a charming toilette, went towards him, disguising under an appearance of carelessness the firmness of her determination.

“Well! Papa, we must go to the Château de Beaulieu to-day,” said she, with a sweet smile.

“And why to-day?” asked Moulinet, surprised. “The Duke is coming, would it not be advisable to wait for him? We shall be better received under his auspices

. . . and he himself will present us to his family.”

“That is precisely what must not be,” replied Athénaïs, with a tranquil face. “Between Claire de Beaulieu and myself there is no necessity for an intermediary. And she will be astonished and with reason at not having learned my marriage from my own mouth. Then, between thee and me, the position of M. de Bligny would be a little false; and I believe that he will thank us for averting from him the difficulties of the first interview. Once the situation plainly defined, there will be no more returning to former ideas, and all will go well. I suppose thou art not afraid of being ill received?”

“Ill received!” exclaimed Moulinet, drawing himself up to his full height and resolutely thrusting his hands into the pockets of his trowsers. “A man in my

position, a late judge at the *Tribunal de Commerce*, is nowhere ill received. If we were not living under a government of nobodies, and if there were a Court at the Tuileries . . . or elsewhere, I should go as to my own house, understand that, my daughter ! Ill received ! By people who have perhaps no more than sixty thousand pounds of income ! That would be curious to see. Wait a little ! I am going to order the state carriage, and the footmen shall put on their gala liveries."

"No, my father," interrupted Athénaïs, "the usual livery, on the contrary, and a Victoria. No parade of our fortune. The richer we are, the more modest must be our appearance. They would mock at our luxury, they will applaud our simplicity."

"Thou thinkest so ?" asked Moulinet, with an accent of regret. "It seems to

me, however, that the knee breeches and the silk stockings would have a good effect . . . But I depend upon thee ; thou art a girl of taste, and thou understandest the usages of high society . . . Prepare thyself, I am going to the stables to tell them to make ready. . . .”

A quarter of an hour later, Athénaïs and her father, drawn at a trot by two vigorous, high-stepping carriage horses, were rolling in a cloud of dust upon the road to Pont-Avesnes.

Oblivious of the resolutions made in a moment of discouragement, Philippe had returned to the Château. To tell the truth the Baron had not allowed him the opportunity to shut himself up in his solitude. This imitator of Louis XVI., in his passion for the mechanical arts, the very next day after the visit paid by Philippe to Beaulieu, arrived early in the morning at

the Foundry, and, taking off his coat, turning up his sleeves, made himself in such a disreputable condition, that the Ironmaster was obliged to give him a change of clothes and to keep him to breakfast.

After that how could he fail to accompany him to Beaulieu? Philippe gave himself so many good reasons for excusing his weakness, that he again saw without displeasure that terrace on which, the evening before, he had passed two hours so full of anguish. Claire showed herself as cold and as indifferent as at their first interview. But the disdainful and haughty attitude of the young girl, instead of putting out of countenance the Ironmaster, this time irritated him. And the more Mademoiselle de Beaulieu affected to ignore him, the more he wished to force her to occupy herself with him.

The Marquise was one of those women happy above all others, whom nature has endowed with a perfect equality of temper. As they had seen her in the evening, so they found her the following day. Philippe, from the first moment, pleased her. The opinion that she then formed of him would never change. She welcomed him with her habitual affability, putting him quite at his ease.

The Baroness, curious to discover the character of him whom she had at first seen in her imagination under the aspect of a kind of Cyclops, displayed for M. Derblay the graces of her lively and frivolous mind. She found Philippe amiable without effort, and interesting without pretension. She declared him a man as strong morally as he was physically, and conceived for him a very special liking.

The Marquis, found in Suzanne a most delightful companion. They planned together formidable games at English billiards and at Dutch humming top, in which the graver people did not sometimes disdain to take a part.

The same day on which Moulinet and Athénaïs set out upon their journey to Beaulieu, a furious game at croquet had begun between the Baroness, Octave, Suzanne and the Baron. The field of battle was a grass-plot lying between the out-buildings and the gate at the entrance, in the middle of the great court of the Château. Through the open windows of the salon, the Marquise and Claire, indifferent to the struggle, heard the resounding blows of the mallets, and the joyous exclamations of the players, when a stroke, skilful or unfortunate, made the victory incline to one side of the camp or

to the other. Philippe and Bachelin, appointed umpires of the game, followed the course of the balls, and, when a dispute arose, gravely measured the distances with the aid of a foot-rule.

A conscientious and attentive arbitration took place, which would have caused the Baron and Suzanne to yield, when a carriage, stopping abruptly before the gate, diverted the attention of the players, making them forget in an instant the whole interest of the game. At the same moment the bell at the entrance, vigorously rung by the footman, left no doubt on the minds of the guests at the Château: there were indeed visitors arriving.

In a second, like a flock of startled birds, the players took flight, scrambled up the perron and re-entered the salon, while a servant bearing a card approached

the Marquise. The latter, adjusting her lorgnon, glanced at the square of card-board, and, raising her head with an astonished air, let fall these words:

“M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet.”

There was a silence, as if each had a presentiment that some grave event was about to take place. The Baroness was the first to recover herself, and, striking her hands together, she murmured:

“This is a little too strong!”

“What do these people want of us?”
tranquilly asked Madame de Beaulieu.

As no one answered, Bachelin took the word:

“*Mon Dieu!* Madame la Marquise, it is probable that M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet, having lately become residents in the country, have judged it expedient to pay several visits to the best houses. You do not ignore that it is the custom.

They have commenced with the Château : that is natural and right. The family of Beaulieu is one of the most important and of the most ancient in the Province. Moreover, does not M. Moulinet affirm that for a long time his daughter has been acquainted with Mademoiselle Claire? . . . Here are more reasons than are needed to account for their presence."

"I suppose, my aunt," exclaimed the Baroness with impetuosity, "that you are not going to lend yourself to the familiarities of the Moulinet family? What can there be in common between this personage and you? He is one of the most ordinary of men. As to his daughter, I give her to you as the most dangerous little pest that there is in this world. Here are indeed parvenus who imagine that they can obtain acquaintances, as they bid for a château, by favour of their millions!

Do not allow it to be done, my aunt, and resist this attempt at forcing an intimacy ! ”

“ I think, my dear friend,” said the Baron quietly, “ that your aunt knows how she ought to act, and that you have no occasion to give her advice.”

The Marquise shook her head with hesitation. She was visibly annoyed. Her indolent nature had a horror of complications and of difficulties. Then, turning aside to her daughter, who had remained silent and immovable, like one who was a stranger to the debate taking place before her :

“ Claire,” said she, “ what dost thou think that we ought to do ? ”

“ *Mon Dieu !* my mother,” answered the young girl with calmness, “ it appears to me very difficult to close our doors against M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet.

It would be necessary to give a pretext. And what? Absence? From their carriage they could see these gentlemen and these ladies playing in the court. We ourselves were at the window. To say quite simply that you do not receive, would be to reply by an incivility to a proceeding truly very courteous. Is it worthy of us? I think not. We must receive them, and, once the visit undergone, stop short there. Is not it your opinion?"

"Yes, my child, thou art right; and it is thus that we must act. Octave, let them be admitted."

An instant after, M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet entered the grand salon of the Château de Beaulieu.

In all women there is something of the actress. Notwithstanding her keen emotion, and although her heart was beating very fast, Athénaïs cut short the embar-

rassment of the first moment by an audacious manœuvre. Hastening towards Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, as to one of her dearest friends, her eyes sparkling with joy, a smile upon her lips, and her hands outstretched, she threw herself upon her neck, crying boldly :

“ Ah ! my beautiful Claire, how happy I am to see thee.”

The astonishment caused to Mademoiselle de Beaulieu by this effusion was so great, that, in spite of her habitual presence of mind, she could not find a word in reply. During this time, Athénaïs, profiting by her advantage, turned to the Marquise, and, saluting her with deference and with perfect modesty :

“ It is indeed a great joy for me, Madame la Marquise, to find myself again near Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. Since I have known her, and it is already a long

time," pursued she, addressing to Claire the most affectionate smile, "to imitate her in all things has been my rule of conduct. And I think that it would be difficult to have a more perfect model."

"To imitate me only?" said Claire with tranquillity. "Thou art modest."

"And it is in truth the first time that it has happened to thee," murmured the Baroness, advancing.

On seeing Madame de Préfont, the joy of Athénaïs appeared to know no bounds. But Mademoiselle Moulinet did not risk throwing herself into the arms of the whimsical Sophie. Formerly, she had too often emerged wounded from those little hands, to hazard publicly the adventure. Who could foresee that this capricious woman would not show to her one of those affronts which hurl down the scaffolding of the best-constructed projects,

and break, with a single blow, all the threads of a cleverly-contrived plot? The prudent Athénaïs limited herself to giving a vigorous hand-shake, making her bracelets ring, but she masked that relative coldness by the warmth of her tender professions. “It was a double happiness for her. What! And that dear d’Hennecourt also!”

Not having been invited to the marriage, she affected to consider that it had not come to pass, and gave to Sophie her name of *demoiselle*. The latter, to put a stop to this adroit equivocation, presented the Baron to Athénaïs, who found a charming phrase to felicitate M. de Préfont for having chosen so attractive a companion.

Manœuvring with the address and self-command of a great tactician, upon this field of battle, planted with obstacles and

with ambuscades, Mademoiselle Moulinet paralyzed her adversaries by her audacity, stupefied her father by her presence of mind, and gave to all a high idea of her intelligence. She seemed to Sophie and to Claire an enemy much more redoubtable than they had foreseen.

That little girl had, in two years, developed in a surprising manner. Physically, she had become very pretty. Rather short, and manifesting a certain tendency to *embonpoint*, which gave to her an appearance of easy good nature, deceptive, but bewitching, she had hair of the blackness of jet, eyes blue and very expressive. Her hands, gloved in *peau de Suède* as far as above the frill of her sleeve very tight and descending below the elbow; her feet, that the very short gown permitted to be seen, betrayed, by a lamentable heaviness, her plebeian

origin. An attentive examination made them think her slightly vulgar. At the first glance, they could not prevent themselves from finding her agreeable.

Moulinet, in ecstasies, had remained mute. He confided to himself that his daughter was a little lady, assuredly superior and incontestably born a Duchess.

The excess of his admiration suddenly affected Moulinet. He thought that if his poor defunct could see Athénaïs, she would be at the same time much charmed and much astonished. This conjugal emotion brought a tear into the corner of the eyes of the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce, who drew out a handkerchief as large as a dinner napkin and used it noisily. A terrible look from Athénaïs recalled him to a sense of the situation, and made him understand that, in

the world in which he found himself, everything must be done with moderation.

Then, bending towards the Marquise, his arms rounded and pressing his hat upon his heart :

“Mademoiselle de Beaulieu and Madame,” said he, designating the Baroness, “were the school-fellows of my daughter at the Sacré-Cœur. I have always applauded myself, and to-day more than ever, for having placed Athénaïs in that establishment, which is without dispute the best in Paris . . . The young ladies receive there an education of the first class, and make there very distinguished acquaintances . . .”

The Marquise allowed a smile to escape her, and, looking at Moulinet above his head:

“I perceive it,” said she, with a shade of irony that the trader did not seize,

but which made Athénaïs turn pale with impotent rage.

“As to myself,” pursued Moulinet encouraged, “I am indeed moved, Madame la Marquise, by the favour that you do me in admitting me to offer you my homage. I owe it to you for many reasons, the first as a new arrival in the country, where I have bought an estate . . .”

The Marquise exchanged a look with Bachelin. The Notary made a gesture which signified: “What did I tell you?” Madame de Beaulieu responded by a nod, which seemed to say: “You were right.”

“A very important estate . . .” continued Moulinet, for one moment put out of countenance by the mute colloquy between the Marquise and the Notary. “La Varenne . . . of the d’Estrelles . . . I did not care about it. But my daughter,

who is very intelligent, has made me understand that, with a large fortune like mine, we must have landed property . . . And then, allow me to own to you, Madame la Marquise, as to opinions, I am liberal, but as to relations, I include only the aristocracy . . . ”

And Moulinet, filliping the front of his white waistcoat with the graces of the eighteenth century, addressed to the circle a smile full of forward good nature. A profound stupor took possession of all the spectators. The pompous folly of the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce crushed Athénaïs, who, without the power of causing a diversion, let herself sink into an arm-chair sighing deeply. The Marquise showed on this occasion the good taste of an accomplished hostess, and the veiled impertinence of a truly great lady.

She was unwilling that Moulinet should perceive the severity with which they were criticising him, but, nevertheless did not renounce the satisfaction of darting at him a few delicate sarcasms. She played then, for those who were able to understand the situation, an exquisite comedy.

“Believe, Monsieur,” said she to Moulinet, “that I am very touched by the sentiments you express to me with such simplicity, so full of frankness. They are worthy of a man arrived at the position that you have known how to create by your intellect.”

Moulinet, charmed by the reply, and seeing in it no malice, thought that the Marquise was indeed a good woman, and promised himself to testify to her very particular respect. He saw the acquaintance entirely delineated between them and

deemed that there was nothing more than to shake hands.

“That is as I am!” cried he with expansion. “And if my character pleases you, Madame la Marquise, I believe that we shall be able to find some pleasure in being neighbours.”

The Baroness, exasperated, could no longer contain herself, she rose, and drawing Philippe into the embrasure of a window, relieved herself by murmuring:

“He is a monster, that man!”

As to Moulinet, seeing that he had produced an impression, but not knowing whether it was good or bad, he launched himself altogether:

“The domain of La Varenne is very considerable. Without doubt you are acquainted with the Château? You know that it is historic? I occupy there the apartment in which the Emperor Charles

Quint slept, from what they have told me. Yes, Madame la Marquise, I sleep in an Imperial bed ! ”

And, making a gesture of modesty, the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce added :

“ Ah ! *Mon Dieu* ! I am none the more proud for that ! ”

This time it was Athénaïs who could no longer contain herself. She saw that in a few minutes her father would compromise her game. And, rising abruptly, her face changed, a wicked look in her eyes, her mouth compressed, her voice hard :

“ Father,” said she, “ ask Madame la Marquise to show thee the admirable terrace of the Château ; one enjoys there, it appears, a marvellous view.”

And, to cut short the paternal effusions, she walked resolutely towards the glass door opening upon the perron. The

Marquise rose, showing the way to Moulinet, and followed by her guests. Claire walked last, full of care, as if foreseeing a catastrophe. At the moment when she was leaving the room, and as she was placing her foot on the first step, she found herself face to face with Athénaïs, who, having adroitly separated herself from the group, was returning to the salon. She recoiled. The glances of the two young girls met. That of Claire amazed and interrogative; that of Athénaïs serious and disquieting.

“Let us return, wilt thou?” said Mademoiselle Moulinet, taking a step into the salon.

“Willingly,” said Mademoiselle de Beaulieu with a sudden tightening at the heart. “Thou wishest to speak to me?”

With the certainty that the divined crisis was imminent, Claire recovered all

her coolness, all her energy. She drew up her splendid figure, and, mistress of her mind, sure of her heart, awaited with superb confidence the attack of her whom she knew to be her implacable enemy.

“Thou canst not doubt the pleasure that I have in finding myself familiarly with thee,” said Athénaïs, without answering the question of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. “In the two years since we left the convent, I have reflected much, I have seen much, I have gained a little experience, and my sentiments are singularly modified. Thus, in former times, we were not precisely good friends . . . ”

“But . . . ” said Claire, slightly knitting her brows and making a movement of haughty protestation.

“Oh! Do not say the contrary!” rejoined Athénaïs quickly, “I did not

love thee ! I was jealous of thee ; I can acknowledge it now. I am sufficiently elevated myself, to have the right of being frank, without seeming humble. Instinctively, however, I admired thee, and my dream was to arrive at being equal with thee."

"To equal me, *grand Dieu!*" said Claire with a bitter smile. "I who am so small a thing ! But thou hast outrun me, I assure thee, and by far ! Judge thyself more impartially ! Beauty, elegance, luxury, thou hast all . . . "

"All, it is true," said Athénaïs coldly, "except a name."

"Well ! But," continued Claire, with simplicity, "in these days a name can be bought. There are some at all prices, low, medium, and high. Indeed, if thou carest for nobility, thou wilt do well to

offer largely. Thy means permit it to thee."

"In fact," replied Athénaïs, forcing herself to steady her voice, which anger had caused to tremble, "precisely at this moment there is a question of a marriage for me."

"Ah! But that is charming. I compliment thee very sincerely."

"I expect more from thee than felicitations."

"And what then?" asked Claire, with astonishment.

"Advice."

"Advice, and upon what?"

"Upon the choice that I am about to make."

"Truly, thou overwelmeest me. To ask of me advice upon thy family affairs? I assure thee that it embarrasses me. We are so little acquainted! Wilt thou

not be able to do without my approbation ? ”

“It is impossible,” said Athénaïs gravely.

“I do not at all understand,” replied Claire with uneasiness.

“Listen to me attentively,” said Mademoiselle Moulinet,” the subject is worth the trouble. The marriage that is arranged for me is a very great marriage, much above my condition, and which surpasses all my hopes. It will be for me a coronet . . . ”

“Royal ? ” asked Claire, trying to smile.

“No, Ducal only,” replied Athénaïs, darting her eyes eagerly into those of her rival. “I shall be a Duchess.”

At these words, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu shivered. It seemed to her that a veil which had extended over her mind

was abruptly torn aside. In an instant she divined the evil tidings carefully concealed from her for so long a time by her relations. She did not doubt for a second that Gaston was in question. His absence, his silence, all was explained. And an immense grief took possession of her. A wave of blood flowed to her heart, while her beautiful face became pallid, and a painful sigh expired upon her lips.

Athénaïs witnessed this sudden change with a furious joy. She delighted in the tortures of Claire, counting with intoxication the confused throbbing of her temples, and enjoying supremely the pleasure of rendering once only to the proud young girl all the humiliations which she herself had drunk in the last quarter of an hour. Seeing Claire immovable, frozen, Athénaïs feared that she would faint and escape

her. Having yet to make her undergo the second part of this ferocious confidence.

“Thou dost not ask me the name of my betrothed?” said she to Claire, who was wavering, her eyes fixed, a dull surging in her ears.

“No,” stammered Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, unconscious of what she was answering, and plunged in painful reflections.

“Nevertheless thou must know it. It is my duty to tell it to thee,” continued Athénaïs. Then, seizing the time well, as if she wished to choose the place where she was about to strike :

“It is the Duc de Bligny !”

Claire was expecting the blow, she had no longer any illusion, being sure of the treason of the Duke. Yet the name of Bligny, which ought to be hers, pro-

nounced by Athénaïs, made her start grievously. She remained motionless, not daring to speak, dreading the alteration in her voice, her hands trembling, her mouth parched, her eyes surrounded by dark circles, she was draining to the dregs the bitter cup of her disappointment.

“M. de Bligny is thy kinsman,” pursued Athénaïs, exasperated by the dull impassibility of her rival, “thy friend from childhood. They have even spoken of certain projects of an alliance between you. I had at heart,—thou understandest now?—the wish to come to thee, loyally, to inform thee of it, and to consult thee.”

In these falsely generous words of Athénaïs, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu saw glimmer a ray of hope. Perhaps things were not so far advanced as they wished to make her believe. She regained

courage and resolved to defend herself to the last.

“To consult me?” said she, “and upon what?”

“Upon the veritable situation of the Duke with regard to thee,” replied Mademoiselle Moulinet with apparent good-nature. Thou knowest that if it had been true that you were promised to each other, thou wouldst be able to accuse me of taking from thee thy affianced. The Duke has asked me in marriage, but as for me I do not love him : I am hardly acquainted with him. He or another, of what moment is it to me? . . . Now! . . . Be frank. Dost thou love him? My marriage with him, will it wound thee, will it merely displease thee? Say but one word and I engage myself to break . . . ”

Perhaps if Claire had courageously

avowed her love, Athénaïs would have given herself the supreme satisfaction of playing at generosity, and have renounced, the better to crush Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, her dream of ambition. In one second, the destiny of the two young girls must be decided. But of all said to her by Mademoiselle Moulinet, Claire retained only a single phrase: "The Duke has asked me in marriage." A burning flush mounted to her forehead. And, ready to die rather than own her tenderness for the Duke, she was able, by a miracle of will, to command her looks, her voice, and to take an attitude easy and tranquil.

"I thank thee," said she with a cold smile. "But be assured that I am not a woman to be abandoned and to be disdained. If the Duke were engaged to me, do not believe that he would

marry another. No! When we are children, between cousins, it is the custom: the family affiances you and you marry with two smiles. These are the games of childhood, but one grows up quickly, reason comes, and the exigencies of life overthrow all these plans. The Duke has asked thy hand thou sayest? . . . Marry him. It would indeed be lamentable if you were not united. You are worthy of each other."

Athénaïs paled under the withering sarcasm of these last words. Claire cast back to her at one blow all that she had been made to endure. They looked at each other exchanging deadly smiles. Between these two enemies, the combat assumed the most exquisite politeness. It was a battle of pricks from golden pins, thrust into the flesh, piercing and dangerous as daggers. A battle of taps

from fans wielded smilingly, but whose perfidious strokes were insulting as blows on the mouth. A war of women, with simultaneous attacks, with refined science, and in which the victory, ardently disputed, would leave the two adversaries, the one as cruelly wounded as the other.

“Then there is nothing in this marriage to vex thee?” continued Mademoiselle Moulinet, expressing her most subtle venom into the wounds that she had made. “How happy thou dost render me! Think then what a dream! Thy kinswoman, thy equal, this time truly, and a Duchess!”

“Thou dost merit all!” said Claire, with profound irony.

“Let me embrace thee!” cried Athénaïs, throwing herself upon Claire, and seizing her by the throat as if wishing to bite her.

Mademoiselle de Beaulieu allowing her to do it, Athénaïs deposited upon the cheek of her enemy the most treacherous kiss that was ever given by woman. And, regarding her gravely :

“Thou knowest that in me thou hast a friend sincere and devoted ?”

Claire had still the power to reply :

“Thou hast given me a proof of it.”

Then, her limbs yielding, she fell back upon the sofa.

Very fortunately, the Baroness, troubled at not seeing the two young girls appear, and suspecting some perfidy from Athénaïs, returned to seek them. She entered, and with a glance, seeing Claire pale and prostrate, Athénaïs upright and radiant, had a presentiment of the scene that had taken place.

“Well ! What have you both been

doing," said she, "shut up here for the last half hour?"

And, anxiously bending over Claire :

"What is it?"

Mademoiselle de Beaulieu did not reply. With a heart-rending look she pointed to her rival who was calmly arranging her gloves like a duellist who has just killed his opponent. This supplicatory appeal for help overthrew the composure of the Baroness. She felt a terrible anger, her small ears became red as fire, and, marching up to Mademoiselle Moulinet with a menacing gesture, she waved her to the door, beginning that significant phrase :

"Thou must go away . . . !"

Athénaïs, with great presence of mind, neatly cut short the insulting words, so that she could appear not to understand them.

“Yes, I must go away . . . to find my father upon the terrace,” said she. Then, turning towards Claire :

“For a little time.”

And, without haste, showing thus that she was quitting of her own free will and victoriously a field of battle which belonged to her, she left the salon.

CHAPTER II.

HARDLY had Mademoiselle Moulinet disappeared when Claire, rising with a bound, sprang upon the Baroness, her eyes sparkling with the rage that she no longer desired to suppress :

“Thou didst know it, thou, that he was about to be married ?” cried she. “Why hast thou said nothing to me ?”

And as Madame de Préfont remained speechless :

“Betrayed ! Forsaken !” exclaimed Mademoiselle de Beaulieu with vehemence, wringing her beautiful hands in a paroxysm of wild despair. “For her ! For that girl ! And you left me to learn it from

her own lips ! She has been able freely to deal me such a blow ! But you were her accomplices ! There is not one amongst you who loves me ! And he ? He ! . . . For money ! The miserable wretch ! ”

Appalled by the spectacle of that overwhelming and violent grief, the Baroness tried to calm her friend :

“ For mercy’s sake ! Claire,” said she, “ thou alarmest me.”

But Mademoiselle de Beaulieu was no longer mistress of herself. The impetuosity of her temper, hitherto subdued, broke forth without the possibility of checking it. The efforts she had made during that horrible interview seemed to her like so many cowardly weaknesses. She asked herself with amazement how she could have refrained from casting in the face of her who was so impudently

playing with her tortures all the insults which were now rushing to her lips. She regretted not having struck and disfigured her. She had the rage of an exasperated plebeian who has been robbed of her lover, the fury of a woman released from all the shackles of propriety, and stamping, maddened, she was deaf to the voice of reason. The blood of the old Barons, who held the power of life and death, boiled in the veins of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, making her dream of ignominious and cruel torments for her rival. But the feeling of her powerlessness again overcame her. She understood that all her hopes were for ever lost, and that active revenge was forbidden to her. The nerves of Claire abruptly gave way, and with terrible sobs, her face deluged by tears, she fell into the arms of the Baroness, stammering :

“ Oh ! How unhappy I am ! How unhappy I am ! ”

Madame de Préfont, deeply grieved, pressed her to her bosom, gently supporting the head of the poor girl upon her shoulder, and, speaking to her in the sweet language that mothers address to their children, to appease their griefs and soothe their sufferings, she strove to restore a little calm to this lacerated heart. Claire wept despairingly. Her tears washed away the venom distilled into the wound by Athénaïs, and alleviated the smarting pain. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, again tranquillized, blushed at having lowered herself by this transport of rage. She wished to rise above her sorrowful situation, and, by a sovereign effort of pride, succeeded.

Her mother, on arriving in the *salon*,

disquieted by a simple confidence that Moulinet had just imparted to her, found her, if not resigned,—at least courageous and composed.

The Marquise, suffocated as much by the emotion that she experienced as by the rapidity with which she had ascended the perron, paused, filled with consternation, before Claire, still livid and trembling. Then, having sought for words that, in her trouble, she could not find, she threw herself into the arms of her daughter, moaning :

“ Ah ! *Mon Dieu*, my poor child ! . . . ”

“ You know, my mother ? ” interrogated Claire, in whose eyes a few tears reappeared.

“ Her father has this instant told me all ! And when I think,” exclaimed the Marquise, raising with indignation her arms to Heaven, “ that it is thou who

in order not to show them rudeness, didst wish us to receive them ! ”

“ I am well rewarded for it, is it not so ? ” said Claire, with bitterness. “ I was imprudent. I ought to have guarded myself from that . . . individual with care. I was so well acquainted with her sentiments with regard to myself. If we, in former times, made her undergo humiliations, how she has avenged herself ! She has never forgiven ! She has awaited the favourable hour, has attacked the most fortunate of her old companions, and has pierced her to the heart ! My life is shattered. The desertion of which I am the victim will always weigh upon me, and if, after the humiliation that has overtaken me, I were so foolish as to think of marrying, who would wish for me now ? ”

“ Who ? ” cried the Marquise, with

vivacity. "All those who shall have eyes to see thee, and ears to hear thee. My dear child, if any one is to be reproached on this occasion, it is not thou, it is the Duke. And, if it please thee to marry, thanks to Heaven, thou wilt only have, in our world and elsewhere, the embarrassment of choice. A girl like Mademoiselle de Beaulieu will not be at a loss for a husband. There are not six months, since I was compelled to decline overtures made to me by very honourable families. And certainly, the people who asked for thee then, and were so unhappy at being refused, cannot so promptly have changed their views."

Claire made a movement of discouragement.

"After the Duc de Bligny," my mother, I have only the right to marry a man who shall be in every respect superior to him,

or a man whom I could appear to love. My sole possible justification, in the eyes of the world, will be in the grandeur or in the attractiveness of my choice. But, my mother, you well know that it is impossible, and that a girl like myself, after such a deception, marries only the convent!"

"Come! my child," said the Marquise, with mildness, "thou art raving. The convent? Well! And ourselves? No! Thou art too young to give up all hope. Thou hast too many moral qualities, and too much beauty, for the future not to have in store for thee certain happiness. In fine, if thou wilt know it, there is, quite near us, some one who would accept thy hand on his knees . . ."

Mademoiselle de Beaulieu raised her haughty eye-brows, and, turning towards her mother:

“M. Derblay ?” said she simply.

“M. Derblay, yes,” replied the Marquise, “and I speak of him but to reassure thy mind. Who can approach thee without loving thee ? . . . Wilt thou that we return to Paris, wilt thou go to Switzerland with M. and Madame de Préfont ? Speak, I am ready to do everything that can content thee and console thee. What dost thou desire ?”

“Ah ! Do I know ?” cried Claire with passion. “I should wish to disappear this instant, to fly from others and myself. I hold the whole world in hatred and in contempt. Alas ! that I cannot die !”

“Death, my dear child, is the only evil for which there is no remedy. If all the women who have been forsaken by their lovers or their husbands were to die, the world would be depopulated ! There are scarcely any faithful men, I tell thee

plainly, and when it is not before marriage that they deceive us, it is after ! ”

As if, in speaking of the infidelity of men, the Marquise had invoked the unfaithful one, who had just caused so many sighs and made flow so many tears, the sound of a furious gallop was suddenly heard, and, through the open gates, the Duc de Bligny, upon a horse white with foam, rode into the court.

In an instant, he sprang to the ground, throwing his bridle into the hands of a stupefied servant, ascended the perron four steps at a time, and, without asking leave, was on the point of rushing straight into the salon, when the Baron and Bachelin, although not in concert, ran to stop him in the hall. Pale, his features drawn, the Duke did not allow them to bar his road without resistance.

“ M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet, are

they still here ? ” asked he in an agitated voice.

And, as the Baron replied affirmatively :

“ My aunt ? I must see the Marquise immediately. Perhaps it is not too late ? ”

“ Undeceive yourself, *mon cher*,” gravely answered the Baron, comprehending the motives of the precipitation with which the Duke had acted. “ It is too late. M. and Mademoiselle Moulinet have spoken.”

The Duke sighed profoundly, and, dropping upon one of the high carved benches in the hall, regarded with affliction the two men, and said :

“ What can I do, now, to repair the harm that has been done ? ”

“ The harm is, alas ! irreparable, Monsieur le Duc,” answered Bachelin in a tone of respectful reproach. “ And the

best that you can now do is to return without seeking to see Madame de Beaulieu."

"To that I will never consent," cried the Duke rising quickly. "I cannot rest under the blame that my aunt has the power to cast upon me. I must explain my conduct . . . Let me give her the assurance that I am not steeped in the infamy that has just been committed . . . I will act as she wishes . . . But I wish to see her, to speak to her, to weep with her . . . You can see clearly that I am in despair at what has happened . . ."

The Duke showed to the Baron and to Bachelin a face so distracted by grief that, prejudiced as they were against the young man, they felt moved.

"Be it so," said Bachelin. "M. le Baron will stay with you, M. le Duc, and I will go to ask Madame de Beaulieu if it suits her to yield to your prayers."

Leaving the two cousins together, Bachelin passed upon the terrace, and went to knock discreetly at the door of the salon.

As if they did not suspect the violent trouble that was disturbing the house at which they were guests, Philippe, Moulinet, Suzanne, Athénaïs, and the Marquis continued to converse peacefully upon the terrace. The sun was sinking to the horizon, the sky, of a blue shaded into green, was streaked with crimson and purple. A delicious calm descended with the evening, over the valley, the depths of which were already filled with shadows. The bell of the church at Pont-Avesnes tolled, distinct and melancholy, in the distance, announcing for the next day the Mass for the Dead. So profound a peace accompanied the close of this beautiful day, that Athénaïs felt

its influence. She found herself less violently embittered. And, having triumphed so completely over her rival, she dreamed of sparing her hereafter.

On entering the salon, Bachelin found the three women a prey to unutterable emotion. Claire, seeing the Duke ride at full speed into the court, stood stupefied and excited. She tried to speak, but could not succeed, and, merely extending her hand towards the new arrival, was seized by a stammering, interrupted by a nervous laugh. She seemed almost mad.

The Marquise and the Baroness were terrified. They darted towards the young girl, who was trembling convulsively, and whose lips had turned quite white, fearing to see her fall in a swoon, and wishing to call for assistance.

With an imperious gesture, Claire arrested them. Then, making an effort,

she succeeded, — between her teeth, clenched by the crisis that had shaken her so severely, — in articulating these words :

“ Nothing . . . no one . . . leave me . . . I shall recover . . . ”

She sank into a chair. A cold dew, tenderly wiped away by the Baroness, moistened her forehead. The Marquise, plucking off her woollen scarf, despoiling herself of her shawls, cast them round her daughter, who was now shivering. A moment passed in horrible anxiety. Her head bent over her chest, her back supported by cushions, Claire remained motionless as if slumbering. Her eyes gleaming and obstinately fixed upon a rose in the carpet, that they were regarding unconsciously, only showed that she did not sleep. Claire was thinking profoundly, a deep line had formed between

her eye-brows, from the weight of an absorbing thought. At the end of a few minutes, the blood returned to her cheeks. A sigh relieved her overburdened heart, and, with a hasty movement, she threw back the shawls with which her mother had covered her. .

The sound of the glass door, opening to give passage to Bachelin, caused her to turn her head. She did not wish to appear unhappy, and smiled at the Notary. The latter, his face marked with dismay, walking quietly, as in the chamber of a sick person, approached Madame de Beaulieu, and, bowing lower than was his custom, as if ashamed of the announcement he was about to make :

“Madame la Marquise,” said he, “pardon me, but something so extraordinary has happened . . .”

“I know,” interrupted the Marquise with abruptness. “The Duke is there. Well?”

“Well! Madame,” continued the Notary, a little abashed; “in spite of all that we could say to him, he insists upon seeing you . . .”

“He is strangely daring!” exclaimed the Marquise, springing up with a vivacity not habitual to her, and walking towards the door of the salon.

“Where are you going, my mother?” asked Claire.

“To have him sent away, as he deserves!” answered Madame de Beaulieu, red with indignation.

Claire was silent for a second, deliberating with herself, as if hesitating to take a grave resolution. Then, shaking her head:

“No, my mother,” said she, “we must

not send away the Duc de Bligny. We must receive him."

"Receive him?" repeated the Marquise with astonishment, asking herself whether her daughter had lost her reason.

"Yes, and smile upon him. For nothing in the world would I have him believe that I am suffering from his desertion. He! to be wept by a girl such as I! He would be too proud of it. Anything rather than his insulting pity! No, receive him, my mother . . . We can certainly open the door to him, as we have not closed it to his betrothed!"

"But what wilt thou do?" asked Madame de Beaulieu, full of inquietude.

"Avenge myself!" answered Claire, with a terrible expression of anger.

Then, turning to Bachelin:

"Be so good," said she, "as to beg the Duke to pass upon the terrace, and

to wait there a few minutes. You will introduce him when I call to you from the window. At the same time, will you send to me M. Derblay ? ”

The Baroness and the Marquise exchanged a glance full of astonishment. The impulse to which Claire was yielding escaped them. Bachelin, more quick-witted, divining that his combinations were ready to succeed, disappeared with the swiftness of a young man. A moment later, Philippe entered the salon.

“ My mother and thou, my dear Sophie, will you withdraw to a little distance, that I may speak alone with M. Derblay ? ”

Madame de Beaulieu and the Baroness retired into the embrasure of a window, and, greatly perplexed, awaited the result of the interview. Philippe, much moved, understanding that his destiny was in the balance, and warned besides, by a word

from Bachelin, that the crisis was imminent, stood immovable, with head bowed before her whom he adored.

“Monsieur,” said Claire, addressing him directly for the first time, “our old friend, our excellent adviser, M. Bachelin, has told my mother that you do me the honour to desire my hand.”

Without speaking, Philippe bowed in sign of assent.

“I believe you to be an honourable man,” continued Mademoiselle de Beaulieu with firmness. “I think therefore that, in order to have formed such projects, you were aware, like all those who surround me, and for some time already perhaps, that the Duc de Bligny was estranged from me . . .”

“Yes, Mademoiselle, I knew it,” articulated Philippe with difficulty; “and believe that even at this moment, if it depended

on me to assure your happiness by bringing back to you the Duke, I should not hesitate, though it cost me my life."

"I thank you," said Claire; "but all ties between the Duc de Bligny and myself are for ever broken. And the most convincing proof that I can give of it, is that, if you still profess the same sentiments, I am prepared to offer you my hand."

While saying these words, the voice of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu faltered, and Philippe imagined rather than heard them. In an instant, the young man recalled the day when, seeing him sad and discouraged, his little sister said to him laughingly :

"Thou wilt see ! She will herself come to thee to ask of thee the favour of being her husband."

Thus the prediction of Suzanne was fulfilled. The child, guided by affection,

had the prescience of the happiness of her brother. He was not dreaming; all was indeed true. Claire herself extended to him her hand. An immense joy flowed into the heart of Philippe; and, taking the charming hand that he had so often despaired of holding in his own, the young man, upon the tips of those icy fingers, pressed the most timid and the most delicious kiss.

“I have a favour to ask of you,” continued Claire. “I wish that you would do all that you can in order to have it thought that our promises have been exchanged for several days. I have no occasion to explain to you the reasons for this deception. They arise from my pride. You are, alas! without illusion as to the state of my heart. But I can assure you that you will have in me a wife faithful and loyal. Will you leave me

now ? But do not go away ; I may require to see you again."

As Philippe withdrew, she made a sign to Bachelin that he could introduce the Duke.

The Notary had very skilfully occupied Bligny, whose impetuosity he dreaded, during the few minutes that the interview between Mademoiselle de Beaulieu and M. Derblay had lasted. He only went to open for him the door that led to the terrace, as Philippe emerged radiant from the salon.

Great was the surprise of Moulinet and Athénaïs at seeing Gaston arrive. Napoléon, expecting Grouchy and perceiving the van-guard of Blucher, was not more overwhelmed than was the daughter of the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce. The Duke at Beaulieu, at this critical moment, was the most dangerous

thing possible for her schemes. Athénaïs felt the most poignant anguish. Sure of victory, was she to undergo a disastrous and humiliating defeat? What would result from the meeting of Gaston and of Claire? Were the cards sufficiently thrown into confusion so that a reconciliation was impossible? Or, with a single look, would the two betrothed regain possession of each other, and, in a passionate embrace, exchange the most solemn and the most binding of vows?

Moulinet himself, though much surprised, did not go so far as the keen imagination of his daughter. He could not understand why the Duke did not await him at La Varenne, but had not the least suspicion of the object that brought him to Beaulieu. He moved towards his future son-in-law with an amiable smile and stretching out his hand to him, but

remained thunder-struck by the glance which Gaston darted at him in passing, without even saluting Athénaïs. Nevertheless, he followed the Duke on his way to the salon.

In an instant, the Marquise and the Baroness had improvised a *mise en scène*. And when Bligny entered, he found the Marquise winding wool, as usual, in the depths of her chair. The Baroness, standing near the fire-place, her hands crossed so that Gaston could not reach to her one of his, as he was in the habit of doing. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu was sitting between her mother and the Baroness, with her back to the light so that the alteration of her features was less visible. The beautiful golden hair of Claire first attracted the eyes of the young man. He trembled in spite of himself, and, seized by violent emotion,

was upon the point of hastening to her whom he still loved so tenderly, to throw himself at her feet, whatever might be the result of that passionate demonstration. The calm and severe face of the Marquise arrested him. And, bowing profoundly before her who had been to him as a mother :

“Madame la Marquise,” said he in a broken voice . . . “My dear aunt . . . You see my trouble . . . my chagrin . . . my regrets ! On arriving at La Varenne, the Château of Monsieur . . . ” the Duke was ashamed to pronounce the name of Moulinet . . . “I heard of some uncalled-for advances . . .”

“But, M. le Duc,” broke in the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce, visibly ruffled.

The Duke, then turning towards his future father-in-law, with sovereign hauteur :

“An incomprehensible proceeding, Monsieur, and of which I declare aloud that I am not an accomplice . . . I have committed many faults, have acted with levity, with ingratitude. But to have authorized such outrageous conduct in the face of my relations, no, that, upon my honour, I have never done !”

“A simple visit of politness,” murmured Moulinet, subdued by the energy of the Duke. “I do not understand . . .”

“You do not understand !” interrupted the young man with crushing scorn, “that is your only excuse !”

But Moulinet was too infatuated with himself to bear any longer this rudeness, even from a man whom he considered a superior being. He took a dignified air, and, bowing with gravity :

“If I am in the wrong, my son-in-law,”

said he, "I beg you to make me acquainted with it: I am ready to repair it."

But in calling him "my son-in-law," he carried to a still higher point the irritation of the young man. And, losing all moderation, the Duke cut short the discourse, this time definitively, of the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce, by an "Enough, Monsieur!" sharp as the blow of a hunting whip. Then daring to glance at Claire, still imperturbably seated, which he had not done since his entrance:

"My aunt, I owe you explanations, suffer me to give them to you. Claire, I will not leave till you have pardoned me."

At these, words which were personally addressed, and that she had seemed to await, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu rose haughtily, and looking at her late betrothed with admirable serenity:

“But, Duke, you owe no explanations,” said she tranquilly, “and you have no occasion for pardon. You are to be married, they tell me, to the daughter of this gentleman.” And in these words alone, Claire lavished mines of impertinence. “You have the right to do so, it seems to me. Were you not as free as myself?”

On hearing these words, the Duke asked himself if he was not the plaything of a dream. He looked at Claire, the Baroness and his aunt, and saw them without apparent emotion, without sadness, without anger. He expected to wipe away tears and he found only smiles. Was it then possible that, during the year so fatally employed in Russia, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu had thus broken away from him?

“Your betrothed came to announce to

me the happy news," pursued Claire; "that was very good, and I will not be reserved with you."

Taking a few steps towards the terrace, she beckoned to Philippe. Devoured by curiosity, Athénaïs boldly followed the Ironmaster and, in an instant, the salon was filled by all the guests at the Château.

"It is necessary, gentlemen, that I introduce you to each other," said Mademoiselle de Beaulieu with frightful coolness. And, pointing out the Duke to Philippe: "M. le Duc de Bligny, my cousin." Then turning to Gaston and braving his eyes: "Duke, M. Derblay, my betrothed!"

A thunder-bolt, falling upon the Château would not have produced a greater shock than that felt by the spectators of the scene. The Duke staggered under the crushing blow. Athénaïs had a vertigo,

and her florid complexion became ash-coloured. The Baron and the Baroness exchanged looks full of amazement. Only Bachelin and Suzanne showed no astonishment. The notary, because he had secretly worked to bring about this *dénouement* ; Suzanne, because, in her adoration for her brother, she had not doubted that Mademoiselle de Beaulieu would end by yielding to the irresistible attractions of Philippe.

The Duke proved that the practice of diplomacy was not useless to him. He recovered promptly, and, taking an irreproachable attitude, addressed to M. Derblay a gracious smile.

“Receive my congratulations, Monsieur,” said he, in a voice which did not tremble too much ; “you will marry a woman of whom very few of us would be worthy.”

Overwhelmed as she was by the wither-

ing retort of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, Athénaïs knew that it was necessary at any price to show a brave face. She went forward in her turn and, regarding Claire with attention :

“All my felicitations,” said she. And in a low tone, with a perfidious smile :
“It is a marriage of love !”

Mademoiselle de Beaulieu shuddered, and, suddenly, all the horror of her position appeared to her. The man whom she adored was there, before her, and he would leave with her rival. At this moment, the unexpected revelation just made to him having dissipated his anger, Gaston was conversing apart with Athénaïs, holding the tips of her fingers, laughing with the carelessness of a happy man. And she, Claire, had, in an impulse of unconquerable pride, decided her life, alienated her liberty. She had promised

herself to a man whom she could never love, for her heart was filled with painful and fond memories of another. Claire cast at the Duke a look of mortal anguish. She was upon the point of crossing the salon, of forcibly carrying him away from the eager and exaggerated coquetries of Athénaïs, and of telling him the whole truth. But she saw him so calm, so indifferent, so frivolous, that a return of anger and of pride saved her from this weakness. She wished, madly, not to appear to have been forsaken, and resolutely sacrificed her whole future to this victory of self-love. Darting at Bligny and Mademoiselle Moulinet a triumphant glance, she murmured :

“ I will be married first.”

CHAPTER III.

THE preparations for the marriage were made with incredible rapidity. All the world of Beaulieu, and of Pont-Avesnes, seemed to become the accomplices of Claire. Philippe set out abruptly for Berry, to seek there papers indispensable to him. The Marquis, at the same time, took the road to Paris. The post and the telegraph competed with each other, in order to accelerate the movements of the trades-people. A violent agitation replaced the calm in which the Marquise had lived during the last year. The gentle woman, stunned by these events, accepted, without finding the

necessary authority to discuss it, the sudden determination of her daughter.

Relying on Bachelin, who had given her such favourable information with regard to M. Derblay, and, moreover, touched by the disinterested delicacy of the Ironmaster's conduct, she saw, with more astonishment than disquietude, this union decided upon. Though regretting that Claire had not consented to wait, so as to choose a husband from her world, she questioned herself, at the same time, whether a man, having fortune and a name, would, in this Positive Century, marry Mademoiselle de Beaulieu without a dowry. The answer appeared to her so dubious that she began to consider it a happy chance the having met with M. Derblay at this critical hour.

Claire did all that depended upon herself to lull to sleep the distrust of her

mother, and to procure absolute security. Showing a radiant face, she gave to the world the impression of her happiness. The Baroness only was in the secret of her anguish and regrets, dispersing her weaknesses and calming her wrath. Shut up in her chamber, extended upon a couch, Claire passed days without speaking, overwhelmed physically and morally, having no longer strength to take a step, her eyes gloomy, her forehead puckered. In her aching brain, she was examining minutely, without cessation, the cruel episodes of the rupture, not being able to accustom herself to the sudden crumbling of her hopes. She wondered how she could have deserved such a calamity, and found that she could not reproach herself. The blow came from the hatred of her rival and from the cowardice of her lover.

Compelled to consider herself as the victim of implacable enemies, as a martyr to relentless fate, the thoughts of Claire turned to revenge. She regarded life as a battle, in which one must be armed with the breastplate of disdain, to escape being wounded, and with audacity, to be able to conquer. She cast from her mind the scruples which had delivered her, bound and defenceless, to her adversaries. She vowed, henceforth, to stop at nothing in order to attain her end. Her heart embittered, her reason troubled, she became revengeful and wicked. Thus, of the noble, generous, and tender Claire, there remained nothing. She turned hard, selfish, egotistical, ready to sacrifice all to her own good pleasure. It seemed that her heart was dried by the fire of her grief. Her beauty itself was modified. It took an aspect in some degree

marmorean, having the majesty and the coldness of a statue.

Examining her approaching change of position, she traced a line of conduct that she resolved to follow without deviation. Her indifference to M. Derblay was profound. She took no pleasure in his blind devotion. Left in ignorance of the generous intentions of the Ironmaster, she attributed his compliance to the unique ambition of becoming her husband. Had not the young man consented to everything, that he might marry a girl so rich, and enter a family so noble? She even conceived some disdain for the facility with which M. Derblay had submitted to the humiliating comedy played before the Duke. Thus, the admirable magnanimity of Philippe appeared to Claire to be meanness. She told herself that she would have in him a husband complaisant

and easy to lead. And it was precisely for that she wished. If M. Derblay showed himself submissive, she would interest herself in him, and, relying upon all the influences of which she could dispose, would charge herself with his future, would raise him to a high position. The elevation of the rank to be thus reached by her husband, would compensate for his want of birth. After all, they were in the century of Parvenus.

The little Baroness, uneasy at the terrible calm with which her cousin was preparing for a union that could not be lightly entered upon, gave herself the task of penetrating into the thoughts of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. She set herself to interrogate the young girl, varying her questions, making them bear upon different points, masking their gravity by

the fantastic and light tone that was habitual to her.

Claire made vain efforts to play at indifference. Bitterness in spite of herself rose to her lips. She allowed the Baroness to see the cruel wound bleeding in her heart. And, having confided in her friend, experienced an immense relief. The Baroness knew all the tortures of the proud young girl. She could admire her courage and, at the same time, sound the depth of her resolutions. With the knowledge acquired in three years of married life, she understood the gravity of the conduct of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, and tried to give her a glimpse of the reality of things. But she came into collision with an invincible will.

Claire promulgated for her own use a kind of law of retaliation. She was suffering through others, others should

suffer through her. So much the worse for them if they were innocent. Had she been guilty? Since injustice was the rule of humanity, she would have no thought of right nor of duty, but would sacrifice all to her own good pleasure. In her mind human beings became means of action. She was determined to make them move, men and women, like pawns upon a chess-board, so as to win a triumphant game. To avenge herself upon Athénaïs and to humiliate the Duke, such was her aim. She resolved to devote everything to that sad satisfaction. And the first victim was the loving and generous Philippe, who, himself, was dreaming of restoring to her whom he adored, her peace of mind and her lost happiness.

Madame de Préfont could not refrain from blaming severely these despotic

intentions. That cruel confusion of right and of wrong, coldly made by Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, in the interest of her own egotism, appeared so senseless to the young wife, that she could only place it to the account of exaggerated feelings, destined to fall with time.

Nevertheless she impressed upon her friend that to tyrannize over thinking and acting creatures, was not so easy as she appeared to think it. Certainly, M. Derblay could not but be very flattered at entering the de Beaulieu family, and, to obtain the coveted honour of marrying Claire, sacrifices ought to cost him but little. In exchange for the service rendered by Philippe to the young girl, in permitting her to overthrow her enemies even at the moment when they believed her humiliated and conquered, she would give him her hand. That was

very well. But what a future would she make for this man? And what would be the attitude of Philippe, when, coming to his wife with open arms, and words of tenderness upon his lips, he should find her grave and cold? Mademoiselle de Beaulieu attributed the pursuit of the Ironmaster to ambition. But could it not be explained by love? Truly, speculations had always a share in matrimonial arrangements. A man would naturally inquire about the property of his future wife. But, after all, one could still see some husbands who loved their wives. Why should not M. Derblay be amongst the number of these phenomena?

Claire had only considered one side of the question, as the Baroness persistently pointed out to her. In marriage, the woman is rarely the sovereign, and man is generally of a disposition prone

to domination. If M. Derblay, who also appeared to know equally well what he desired, began to mutiny and to wish to overthrow all the plans constructed by Claire, what would result from the collision of those two wills? This was not a question of an alliance of a few hours, like those contracted behind a fan, to carry on an intrigue of the salon, or to baffle a worldly machination. It was a life engagement. And it would not be possible to dismiss her auxiliary, by giving him as recompense, for the concurrence lent, the tips of her fingers to kiss. He was a husband, that is to say a being to whom she would be indissolubly united. She ought to reflect before forcing affairs farther. Once married, it would be no longer possible to draw back; this would not be a comedy that they could play out in five minutes.

It might end in a tragedy, however little it was expected. And perhaps it would be better to stop while there was yet time.

All these reasons found Mademoiselle de Beaulieu obdurate. She showed herself ready to risk everything rather than modify her projects. She wished to appear to have forsaken the Duke, and resolved to be married before him. The day for the marriage was fixed. Nothing could induce her to recede. Claire felt however that she had been imprudent in allowing the Baroness to read so completely her thoughts. And deemed it necessary to deceive her. She unbent the hardened and contracted muscles of her face, and succeeded in smiling. In a careless tone she commiserated playfully poor M. Derblay, who was condemned by his sad fate to marry a girl like herself, and who would

not find sufficient advantages in the alliance to compensate him for the temper, capricious and a little tyrannical, of his wife.

The Baroness was taken in the snare prepared for her by Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. She relied upon the future to dissipate the black melancholy, and to calm the disquieting irritation of Claire. Saying to herself, that marriage is full of surprises for a young girl, and that possession tames the most violent characters. Once *tête-à-tête* with her husband, the most refractory is obliged to become reasonable. A man who is not a fool and who is very enamoured, can singularly change the opinions of a woman. And then, if she should become a mother, the situation is totally altered, the tigress becomes the most gentle and the most tender of sheep.

These reflections tranquillized the Baroness. She was not a woman, besides, to follow very long the same idea. And, having exhausted herself in gravity and penetration during one day, she wandered from the subject for the rest of the week.

Moreover, Philippe had returned from his journey, bringing back with him the ring of betrothal: a beautiful deep red ruby, surrounded by brilliants. Tremblingly, the poor fellow asked of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu permission to pass it upon her finger. Claire had only a disdainful look for this princely jewel. She stretched out her white hand to M. Derblay with a haughty indifference, and did not address to him a word of thanks. That ring was to her the symbol of her engagement: it was odious to her. And, the next day, Philippe, with a terrible con-

traction of the heart, remarked that she no longer wore it. He feared to speak of it, being so timid in her presence! But his eyes, fixed upon the hand of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, were so eloquent, that the young girl could not resist saying to him: "You will excuse me, I never wear rings."

These words reassured the Ironmaster. In the putting aside this jewel, he had fancied that he saw, a kind of repulsion manifested by Mademoiselle de Beaulieu to all that came from him. He knew how far he could depend upon the sentiments of the young girl, having assisted at the crisis predicted by Bachelin. He did not ignore that he had been accepted only through pique. But he felt so enslaved by passion, so full of tenderness, that he believed himself sure of gathering to his bosom this troubled heart. How could

a woman be insensible to an affection constant, attentive, delicate, devoted? Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, disappointed in her hopes, had grievously fallen back upon herself. But, at twenty years old, how could the heart close itself for ever? In the bloom of youth, to be willing to live indifferent and frozen. To have the ears shut to all the appeals of life, the eyes closed to all the smiles of hope. Was it credible? Philippe, distractedly enamoured, felt certain of gaining her love. The young girl believed her heart dead, it was only sleeping. Little by little it would become reanimated, it would again begin to beat. And for whom, if not for him, who would have aroused it from its lethargy? Philippe, having saved that heart, would not he have rights over it? And Claire, restored to life, her eyes opened, appreciating the difference

between the affection that she had lost and that which she had won, would she not recompense Philippe for her deliverance, by an existence filled with happiness?

Thus reflected Philippe during his hours of speechless contemplation. Forced from his youth to fling himself into the absorbing occupations of a weighty business, never having the leisure to go into society, he had remained very timid. Women in general confused him greatly. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, made him tremble. He never approached her without a terrible palpitation. That cold and grave Claire had only to direct upon him her tranquil eyes, to put him immediately out of countenance.

While climbing the hill between Pont-Avesnes and Beaulieu, Philippe unfolded to Suzanne all his projects for the future; he indicated to her the repairs that he

thought of in the restoration of the Château, and told her, finally, how much he loved his betrothed. Suzanne, with a smile, listened to him, animated, his eyes sparkling, his words glowing. She understood that he was repeating his lesson, that he was pouring out his heart before presenting himself to Claire. And when, in quest of approbation, her brother addressed to her an inquiring: "Is it not?" she replied maliciously:

"But it is not to me that thou shouldst relate all that, Philippe, it is to her. I, thou knowest, find all that thou sayest so wise, and all that thou dost so good, that I am always of thy opinion. But Mademoiselle de Beaulieu . . ."

"Therefore, I will speak to her to-day," said the Ironmaster with resolution . . .

"Oh! I have so many things to tell her!"

But, on arriving at the Château, and in

the presence of Claire, his confidence disappeared. He stammered "good day." And disconsolately seated himself apart, regretting not to be able, by a miracle, to open his heart, like a casket, so as to show to the young girl, all the mysterious treasures it contained.

Cold had come with the first days of November. And now they could no longer scatter themselves in groups about the terrace. The guests at the Château shut themselves up in the grand salon. Philippe found in that closer intimacy a few occasions to speak with advantage, not of his passion: he continued to have his lips closed when there was a question of himself; but upon general subjects, skilfully seconded by Octave and by the Baron, he displayed the soundness of his judgment and the solidity of his knowledge. Claire sat near her mother, who was listening

absently while winding her wools at the corner of the hearth, on which blazed a large fire, not allowing her eyes to leave her embroidery. Through the open door of the billiard-room, the bursts of laughter of Suzanne and of the Marquis, furiously fighting over a game of drawing-room croquet, came in joyous peals. They only, threw a little animation over the scene. Becoming intimate from the first day, they amused themselves together like two children.

Athénaïs, enraged at having seen her crafty combinations miscarry, had started for Paris, taking with her the Duke and her father.

Moulinet returned to pay a farewell visit, and had been very politely received by the Marquise. At the request of Claire, Madame de Beaulieu smoothed her forehead, unpuckered her lips, and wel-

comed the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce as the future father-in-law of a tenderly-loved nephew.

Thus, the mother herself consented to play her part in the comedy prepared by her insulted daughter. The Moulinets and the Duc de Bligny were able after this to give credit to the declaration so publicly made by Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, and to discard the thought that they had wounded her. The Duke was astonished to find himself innocent, after having believed himself guilty. Athénaïs admired her rival's strength of soul, and, feeling herself conquered, she who had thought to conquer, promised herself terrible reprisals.

The marriage that she had planned to celebrate at La Varenne, with great pomp, in the superb chapel of the Château, must decidedly take place in Paris. She well

understood that the Bourgeoisie of Paris, invited by her father, would not come into the province to swell the *cortège*, and she suspected that the great families of the country, invited by the Duke, might easily abstain from having themselves represented. Fearing a check, she would not expose herself to it. But, promising to return for the marriage of her future cousin, — of her “good Claire,” as she affected to call Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, — she quitted La Varenne.

This departure was a relief to Claire. Her rival having withdrawn, it seemed to her that the air she breathed was more pure. Her beautiful face brightened, and she felt an impulse of joy. Philippe had secretly put workmen in Pont-Avesnes to renovate the apartments of the Château, a little deteriorated by time. He profited by this gleam of good humour, to propose

to Madame de Beaulieu to pay a visit to the future residence of her daughter. The invitation was accepted, and the following day, in a large Brake, all the inhabitants of Beaulieu descended upon Pont-Avesnes.

On entering the gates, the impression produced was favourable. The great court planted with old lime-trees, the sheet of water, the Château, surrounded by its dry moats filled with fruit-trees, pleased Claire. The park, with its deep and gloomy alleys, promised to her silence and contemplation. The solemn sadness of the vast apartments seemed to the young girl to be in harmony with her melancholy. This residence, without prospect, shut in by gigantic trees, would have appeared a tomb to any other. Mademoiselle de Beaulieu found it to her taste.

The Baroness, surveying the reception-rooms, uttered exclamations of surprise and of joy at seeing the rich antiquities collected by the father of Philippe. The furniture of Louis XIV., worked in small stitches, transported her with delight, and she was in ecstasies before the lofty *portières* of Beauvais, representing the battles of Alexander. The love of antiquity, so widely diffused in our day, has made of every one who respects himself a kind of expert. The Baroness had frequented art sales, and it was marvellous to hear her valuing the carved buffets bearing the godroons of Henri III., and the *bon-bonnières* of old Saxe. She had a diverting affectation of striking a little dry blow upon the dishes in faïence, to discover if they were intact. And she discoursed, going from one salon to another, with the vivacity and eagerness of a young parrot,

deafening her aunt, who did not understand a word of her locutions on bric-à-brac. Only Brigitte, appreciated the enthusiasm of the Baroness for the furniture that she had looked after during so many years, placing to the account of her cleanliness the eulogies of the young woman.

Suzanne and Octave did not even enter the Château. While conversing, they walked through the formal alleys of the flower-garden, laid out in the French style; then Suzanne suddenly ran off to the kitchen, and bringing back an enormous piece of bread, broke off, with the aid of the Marquis, morsels to throw to the carp which inhabited the little lake. They had been there half-an-hour, amusing themselves by the efforts made by the greedy creatures to carry away a large floating crust. As to the Baron, the

neighbourhood of the Foundry had not left him his freedom of mind. Passing through a narrow path that he was well acquainted with, he went in the direction of the offices.

Claire, whilst the Baroness was making an inventory of the furniture of Pont-Avesnes, and Philippe was doing the honours of his house to Madame de Beaulieu, remained behind. A glass door, giving access to a flight of steps, led into the park. Opening it, she descended alone. In the distance, the hammers at the Foundry were sounding gaily on the anvils, the smelting furnaces were roaring, throwing towards the sky their volumes of thick smoke. The park was solitary, gloomy, and mysterious. The noise and the silence formed a contrast bewitching to Claire. She passed far under the arched roof of the trees, the foliage

already crimsoning by the gales of autumn. Walking with slow steps upon the moss of the alleys, she lost herself in a grave reverie.

This park, sombre and deserted, appeared to her to be the well-chosen frame in which her life was to be enclosed. The dead branches crackling under her feet were detached from the trees, as her hopes had fallen from her heart. She was going to cast away her dreams as she scattered the withered leaves. Even as these great woods were dumb and desolate, all in her was inert and cold. She followed in this manner the obscure alley, tasting, with a bitter joy, the sadness of Nature. Unexpectedly, at a turn in the path, she perceived, through a large vista, the sunny country, extending in the distance its fertile plains. It was like a picture abruptly uncovered. Claire felt

a violent shock. Lately, she had so completely identified herself with her surroundings, that her mind was impressed. Thus, in an instant, gaiety succeeded to sadness. After this park dismal and dark, these fields smiling and full of life. Would it, then, be the same with her? The feelings that she experienced, would they also change? The young girl turned with anger from the laughing landscape lying before her. And, re-entering the solitude, the sadness, the gloom, she repulsed the golden promises of the future.

When, astonished and a little troubled at her long absence, the Baroness, Philippe, and Madame de Beaulieu went in quest of her, they saw her returning, with lingering steps, through the silent alley. She was calm and smiling. Her eyes, alone, yet humid from the tears secretly

shed, bearing witness to the grievous combat that had taken place in her heart. The Baron, torn from his attractive scientific observations, Suzanne and Octave, having landed from the boat in which they had been navigating the lake, the Marquise stepped into the carriage, taking with her Philippe and his sister to dine at Beaulieu.

One week only separated Claire and Philippe from the day so much desired by the pride of the one and by the love of the other. As the time fixed drew near, the young girl became more nervous, more agitated. All who saw her, during that last week, were able to believe that she was happy in this union, so anxious did she seem to conclude it. She appeared to dread that an obstacle would intervene at the last moment.

Parcels did not cease to arrive by the railway, and the officials at the post office were worn out. At the Château, the bells had the dance of Saint-Guy, and the servants, accustomed to the calm and tranquil service of the country, became distracted.

Then, at the moment of issuing the invitations, Mademoiselle de Beaulieu took two resolutions that stupefied her family. She declared that she would have the nuptial ceremony take place at midnight, without the least pomp, in the little church of Pont-Avesnes, and that no one should be present but the relatives of Philippe and herself. The Marquise raised her eyes to Heaven; the Baroness fell with dejection into an arm-chair, and remained ten minutes without speaking. Octave asked his sister, quite plainly, if she had gone mad. Philippe

let no one know what he thought of it.

Claire, without furnishing reasons, maintained her will, and supported unyieldingly the attack of her family. To be married at midnight! It was already tolerably strange, although that fashion still reigned in the Faubourg Saint-Germain. A black Mass! No doubt, Claire was considering herself as the widow of the Duke; it was mourning! Strictly, one could pass over the marriage at midnight; but, to invite no one! Did she wish to seem to hide herself? Would Mademoiselle de Beaulieu appear to blush for her husband? That would bring misfortune.

This last consideration, risked by the Baroness, was of no more weight than the other arguments.

Philippe, pressed to break silence and

to give his opinion, terminated the affair by declaring that the arrangements of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu appeared to him excellent, and that, so far as he was concerned, he saw no inconvenience in acting on every point in accordance with her wishes.

The person most interested making no objections, opposition at once fell to the ground. The Baroness, very vexed,—she had sent to Paris for a magnificent robe for the occasion,—said laughingly that this would be a marriage like those seen in the dramas, at the Porte-Saint-Martin, when one condemned to death, before mounting the scaffold, receives from the King, the favour of espousing in prison, her whom he loves.

The signature of the contract took place on the eve of the great day. Bachelin, obliged to choose between his two clients,

as he was at the same time the Notary of M. Derblay and of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, took as an assistant one of his colleagues from Besançon, himself representing the noble family for whom his fathers had acted for centuries. The old practitioner glided over the reading of the contract with extreme ability. And Claire, even if she had listened attentively to the obscure language gabbled through by Bachelin, would certainly not have been enlightened as to her position. The young girl remained in the most complete ignorance of her ruin, and when she saw the pen presented to her by Bachelin, who was indeed more trembling and more moved than herself, she signed without distrust the deed which would give into her hand, half the fortune of M. Derblay.

Philippe, once the contract legally executed, felt more at ease, but owned

later that he had not been assured in mind till, when to the question put by the Maire to Mademoiselle de Beaulieu : “ Do you consent to take M. Philippe Derblay for your husband ? ”—he heard Claire, in a firm voice, answer : “ Yes.”

CHAPTER IV.

IT was nearly one o'clock in the morning when Suzanne, all in white, having left the Sacristy before the conclusion of the signatures, arrived like a puff of wind in the apartment of the bride and bridegroom. In the small salon before the high chimney-piece of sculptured stone, the faithful Brigitte, on her knees, was blowing with a vigorous hand to forward the combustion of a large fire, the rays of which gleamed on the fleur-de-lis ornamenting the cast-iron plate at the back of the hearth. Hearing the door shut, the honest woman turned round, and without rising, the bellows in her hand, addressed a beaming smile to Mademoiselle Derblay.

“What, Mademoiselle Suzanne, you have already returned from the Church?” said she. “Is the marriage then finished?”

“Finished! Quite finished, my good Brigitte, and I have left every one with our dear Curé, to come to give here my last look! We have a new mistress of the house, Brigitte. We must try to please her.”

“Eh! *Mon Dieu*, how should she not be pleased,” cried Brigitte, “from the moment that she shall be here with our Philippe? And then if the bird is pretty, the cage is beautiful enough!”

And the servant cast a glance full of admiration, over the severe and magnificent furniture of the date of Henri III. which adorned the lofty room, caressing with a look the large arm-chairs with carved backs, the squat bulging cabinets with

turned feet, and the hangings in old leather of Cordova, the gilding of which glittered faintly in the shadow. A door half open led into the bedroom, dimly illumined by a lamp, whose light was reflected in the triple panels of a superb *armoire* with glass doors of the style of Louis XVI.

“And through there, is everything in order?” asked Suzanne, pointing to the room.

“Everything, I can answer for it, I did the work myself. This marriage turns the heads of our servants, one can get nothing from them, the sluggards!”

Then, approaching the young girl, with eyes full of mirth:

“When one thinks, Mademoiselle, that in a year or two it will be your turn to put all upside down in the house!”

Suzanne reddened, and, moving away with a little embarrassment :

“There is no question of that, my good Brigitte, happily !”

“Happily !” exclaimed the servant. “Ah ! So much the better ! But who is then that handsome gentleman who gave you his arm when setting out, and who had such an attentive manner to you ? . . .”

“He is M. Octave de Beaulieu,” replied the young girl, affecting to walk round the salon, as if to take a last survey, “the brother of Mademoiselle Claire . . .”

“Eh ! Eh !” said Brigitte with a hearty laugh, “here is a groomsman who has greatly the air of ardently desiring our orange blossoms !”

“Now, my good Brigitte, thou dost not know what thou art saying, said

Suzanne, crimson to the roots of her hair . . .

The sound of many carriages, rolling over the gravel of the court, interrupted very opportunely the prattle of Brigitte. Suzanne rushed to the window. In the obscurity, the lamps were gleaming, lighting the sombre foliage of the trees.

“Here are our people arriving,” cried the young girl. And, opening the door, she passed into the great salon at the moment when the Baroness, hooded and clothed as for an expedition to the North Pole, entered, followed by Octave and the Baron, exclaiming :

“Do not disturb yourself! It is we! There is a fire, what happiness! I am a veritable icicle!”

Drawing forward an arm-chair, the young woman installed herself before the

hearth, raising her robe and exposing to the blaze her two little feet shod with slippers of black satin. Then, sighing, she cast off her furred mantle which fell to her waist, saying: "Ah! that is better! . . ."

The carriages, now, succeeded each other rapidly before the perron, bringing the relatives of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu, the witnesses of M. Derblay, and a few friends that it had not been possible to omit. M. Moulinet, Athénaïs and the Duke had assisted at the ceremony. The famous Berlin for gala occasions, and the full-dress liveries of the footmen were made use of for this marriage. Unfortunately the darkness was profound, and the splendour of that brilliant equipage had not produced its full effect. Moulinet would have given a hundred francs if it had only been moonlight:

the queen of night was incorruptible and did not show herself.

The late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce was, besides, in a state of disenchantment. Come from Paris, thinking to assist at a marriage of the great world, he had fallen upon the most insignificant of ceremonies. He hoped to see the noblest families represented at this wedding, and in the salon, at this moment, he perceived . . . Whom? The Notary who had sold to him the estates of La Varenne, the relations and the witnesses of the bride and bridegroom. It was a mockery!

Nevertheless Moulinet had an instant of genuine emotion, and he discovered that the ceremony took imposing proportions. It was when in descending from Beaulieu, on the way to the church, the carriages passed through a compact

crowd of the workpeople of M. Derblay, drawn up in silence upon the Place. The good fellows, though not invited to the Mass, were not willing to allow their dear patron to go to the church unless they were there to take off their hats to his young wife. And, clad in their Sunday clothes, they were grouped before the portal, awaiting the *cortège*. In the night, that mass of fifteen hundred or two thousand individuals, men, women, and children, well conducted, speaking in low tones, appeared enormous. And when, as the carriages passed, all heads were uncovered, Moulinet felt a violent agitation. He wished to smile and to bow as he had so often seen done by official personages on *fête* days, but, suddenly impressed and discomposed, he felt his throat tighten and he began to laugh without knowing why.

Recalled to himself by an irritated look from Athénaïs, he alighted with great dignity, taking superb airs with his head, and correcting the folds of his pearl gray trowsers, a little creased at the knees. The church seemed to him narrow and dirty. He seated himself with a grimace upon one of the wooden stalls that furnished the choir, casting arrogant glances upon all that surrounded him. There were not twenty wax-candles burning on the altar, and the good Curé had put the same sacerdotal decorations that had served him eight days previously, at the marriage of the daughter of a joiner. Moulinet had the *Voltaire* ideas of an old subscriber to the *Siècle*. He was in a scoffing mood, and, leaning towards the Duke, wished to open a conversation. The latter, raising his eyes, regarded him so strangely, that

Moulinet thought it prudent to desist. His attention returned to the ceremony which was proceeding, simple, as for the poor. The organ, alone, touched by a masterly hand, accompanied with its strains the words of the priest. And, under that arched roof cold and bare, its solemn notes resounded with a deep melancholy.

The Duke pale, his eye-brows knit, seemed gravely absorbed. That music caused him pain. By a sudden rush of memory, he saw himself in the dreary church of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, assisting at the funeral of his father. They were the same plaintive notes from the organ, the same obscurity pierced by the bright points of flame of the candles. The same odour of lighted wax-tapers and the same perfume of burning incense, going to the heart and wringing it. He

had then at his side his aunt, who wept while looking at him, and Claire and Octave, clad in black like himself, tenderly clasping his hands. And now, he was alone. Those dear beings who had surrounded, consoled him, who had been so good, he was separated from them and for ever. The bonds attaching him to them he had broken, and voluntarily. Claire, whom he adored, was the wife of another; and he, he was to become the husband of a stranger who had used him, he was well aware of it, for her malignant projects. An immense sadness took possession of him, and he bitterly deplored his weakness. To those who had received and loved him, when he was an orphan, he had returned evil for good. In this way he had paid his debt. But was not he himself punished? And, in forsaking

Claire, had he not renounced his own happiness ?

He was led to contrast the conduct of Philippe with his own, and he could not refrain from acknowledging that, inasmuch as he had been ungrateful and egotistic, the Ironmaster was showing himself devoted and generous. He was able to marry the woman whom he loved, although she was without fortune. He was a worker. The Duke grievously regretted his own uselessness. In the world he was of only a negative value. Like a cipher, before which a figure must be placed, in order to give it a signification. So that he might be able to make some profit from himself, it was necessary that a rich tradesman should taint his great name. But, by himself, what could he do ? Nothing. He was a man for luxury and show. They bid for him as one

buys a handsome horse, for parade and ostentation.

These reflections, that he had never before made, inspired in him a great horror of Moulinet. He saw himself his slave. Furious, he resolved to revolt against his power, and to keep it in subjection. At the same time, Athénaïs appeared to him that which in reality she was, a little Bourgeoise, without largeness of ideas, without dignity of character, meanly envious and wicked. He regarded her kneeling upon her Prie-Dieu, compressed in her superb robe too richly ornamented for a young girl, gaping inattentively with a wearied air. Then his eyes wandered towards Claire, who, bowed under her white veil, seemed sunk in absorbed prayer. And, from the movement of her shoulders, the Duke divined that she was weeping.

Near her, upright, immovable, his face severe, stood the tall figure of Philippe. Was this the man that she loved and that she preferred to the Duke? Bligny, in an instant, discovered the meaning of the conduct of Mademoiselle de Beaulieu. The situation, which for fifteen days had been obscure to him, became luminous. The veritable position of the Ironmaster occurred to him. And, seeing Claire so beautiful in her grief, a thought crossed his mind which brought a fleeting smile to his lips. The Bligny tender and true of the last two weeks disappeared for ever, and he again became the sceptical and cold profligate that Russian corruption had made him.

From this M. Derblay, the principal author of the humiliation inflicted on him, he promised himself to exact a very sweet vengeance. This beater of iron, in the

absolute possession of an adorable woman such as Claire, was it possible to support it? It was indeed that, that he would make him see, and before very long. She is weeping, thought he: she detests that man and she loves me still.

All his confidence returned to him. Till this moment, he had looked ill at ease and constrained. Feeling himself upon familiar ground, he resumed the haughty and independent bearing of a great Lord sure of his superiority. The Baroness having turned to his side, at the end of the mass, he bent upon her a look so charged with irony that she frowned, with the instinctive hostility of a watch-dog who divines an evil-disposed person.

When, the mass terminated, they passed into the narrow and poor Sacristy, and the Bride, raising her veil, permitted

herself to be seen by her friends and relations, the Duke sought vainly upon the face of Claire the traces of the tears that he had seen her shed in silence. The fire of her pride had dried them, and, calmly smiling, she was speaking with perfect composure. The Duke was dissatisfied; he wished to see her dejected. He thought that the proud young woman was defending herself against him, and that there would be a struggle. He promised himself to fight, and he did not despair of triumphing.

Again in the superb Berlin with his future father-in-law and Athénaïs, he was compelled to undergo the flood of observations that Moulinet had been obliged to suppress during the ceremony. "It was a gay thing this marriage at midnight in a sepulchral church, where

the cold fell upon your shoulders like a mantle of lead." He did "not at all understand marriages of that kind," the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce. "In three weeks he would lead his daughter to the altar, and then they would see what was really a wedding. The mass would take place at the Madeleine. He had ordered all that there is of the most expensive. The whole choir illuminated, flowers, green trees, and finally the choruses and the solos . . . "

"Soli," interrupted the Duke, whom this ostentatious splendour began to provoke.

"Solos, soli . . . " continued Moulinet, who did not attach great importance to the accuracy of the termination. "In fine, the singing, executed by artistes from the Opera, M. Faure, all

that there is of the best . . . It will be fifteen thousand francs! But what is that to me? Moulinet does not marry his daughter every day, and it will be necessary that people should talk of it for a long time . . .”

“Monsieur, however little they may talk of it, they will talk too much,” interrupted the Duke, in a tone cutting as the blade of a knife . . .

“But, my son-in-law . . .” answered Moulinet, vexed . . .

“But, Monsieur,” interrupted once again the Duke, “in the first place, I am not yet your son-in-law, and afterwards you will greatly oblige me by never using to myself that appellation which is most vulgar, and most tradesman-like. Finally, I will remark to you that we have arrived at the house of M. Derblay, and I beg of you as a favour, in the

interest of all of us, to speak as little as possible . . .”

And, descending slowly from the carriage, which had just stopped, the young man graciously offered his hand to Mademoiselle Moulinet to assist her in alighting, while the late *Juge de Commerce*, completely stunned, asked himself with disquietude if the Duke took him for a fool.

In the grand salon of Pont-Avesnes, the Marquise, seated in the depths of a large arm-chair, listened to Bachelin, who was speaking to her in a low voice. Madame de Beaulieu had the same morning begged the Notary to ask of Philippe his consent to inform Claire of the true state of her fortune. The marriage being concluded, the Marquise thought that it would be right to make known to the young wife her ruin and the tender

disinterestedness of her husband. The Ironmaster would thus receive the just recompense of his delicacy.

Philippe, eager to avert all care and all bitterness from Claire, refused. He did not wish that his young wife, on first setting foot into his house, should think that she was entering it in some wise lowered. To afflict that delicate and sensitive mind? And wherefore? In order to assure to himself the enjoyment of his self-esteem? In order to win from Claire a few words of confused, and perhaps, humiliated thanks? It seemed to him unworthy of himself to use such means to gain the affection of *Maiselle de Beaulieu*. He wished for more than her gratitude. He aspired to her love.

“My dear Bachelin, I will do as *M. Derblay* desires,” answered the Marquise.

“But I do not know if, in his place, I should show so much delicacy. In every circumstance, he has astonished me, I own it to you. He has a largeness of views, a surprising elevation of character. He is indeed an extraordinary man.”

“It is what I had the honour of telling you, Madame la Marquise, when I spoke to you of him, you may remember it,” replied Bachelin. “Truly he is a nobleman !”

“Yes, yes, we have been fortunate,” added the Marquise; “and it is to you that we owe this happy result. Let us hope that my daughter will, like ourselves, know how to appreciate her husband . . . She is very pale, Bachelin ! . . .”

The old Notary turned. Claire, white as the dead, under her wreath of orange blossoms, reminded him of Juliet rising from her marble bed at the loved voice of

Romeo. The Duke was approaching her, and, bending with a melancholy smile :

“ We are about to leave, Claire,” said he, “ but, before going, I have determined to speak to you. My heart is deeply sad and troubled. With one word, you can restore to me tranquillity. Be kind, tell me that you forgive me . . .”

Claire drew up her head with pride and, casting at the Duke a triumphant glance, she answered in a voice that did not tremble :

“ I have forgotten everything. I love my husband. Farewell, Duke.”

Bligny started, and, rendering bravado for bravado :

“ I hope that in speaking thus you are sincere,” rejoined he.

Then, in a tone almost menacing, he added :

“ *Au revoir,*” Claire.

And, again bowing, he withdrew.

“Well, Duke, you are leaving?” asked the Baron stopping the young man as he was passing.

“Yes,” replied the Duke coldly. “I have nothing more to do here. It is the turn of the husband.”

“Eh! Eh!” said the Baron, “you seem to be not without some bitterness. Seeing Claire married, own that you have regrets!”

With a mocking glance, the Duke indicated Claire who could hardly support herself:

“Regrets?” rejoined he. “Is it I who have them?”

“*Mon cher*, that is an answer tolerably affected and rather ridiculous,” continued M. de Préfont. “But, as you believe yourself such a conqueror, do me a favour . . . Look at M. Derblay, tell me

if he has the appearance of a husband from whom one could take his wife? . . .”

The Duke fixedly regarded Philippe, who was standing erect in a corner of the salon. His face, embrowned by the free air, breathed energy. The anger of such a man would be terrible.

“Peuh!” exclaimed the Duke in a light tone, “since Vulcan, blacksmiths have had no chance.”

“Well!” answered the Baron with gravity, “believe me, beware of the hammer!”

Bligny shrugged his shoulders with carelessness, and, joining M. Moulinet in the recess of a door:

“We will go when you are ready,” said he.

“It is not I who will detain you,” murmured the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce. What a reception! My

dear Duke . . . They have not even offered us a glass of water ! Amongst us Bourgeois, we should call this a dry wedding. You will see how I, myself, shall do things . . . I shall give two dinners and a ball, which will make a sensation . . . And when our guests shall leave my house, I answer to you that they will not have the stomach in their heels ! ”

Moulinet would have continued to enumerate the splendours that he was planning ; but the Duke did not listen to him. He was watching Athénaïs making her adieux to the Bride. The young girl advanced towards Claire and, taking her hands, abandoned herself to noisy demonstrations of tenderness.

“ We shall be quite near each other during the summer,” said she. “ La Varenne is only a league. But, in the winter, how thou wilt miss me ! . . . Ah !

without thee, Paris will seem to me empty ! Will M. Derblay shut thee up at Pont-Avesnes, without pity, without mercy ? I know, indeed, that here thou wilt have nothing to desire : thou art loved, thou lovest . . . Promise me that thou wilt think of me in thy joys and in thy sorrows, if thou hast any. Thou knowest that I shall always take my share of them.”

These perfidious and cruel words found Claire impassible.

“Be sure,” replied she, “that I appreciate thy friendship at its just worth. But thou knowest that happiness seeks no confidants. I shall be happy without telling it.”

Athénaïs, rage in her heart, hopeless of conquering her intrepid enemy, at least wished to spare her no vexation.

“Wilt thou kiss me ?” said she.

“Very willingly,” replied Claire, without hesitation, pressing her soft and burning lips upon the forehead of Athénaïs.

But the young woman was at the end of her strength. And hastily taking the arm of the Baroness who was standing near, she drew her from the salon, saying :

“Let us go out; I am suffocating! . . .”

The Marquise, disquieted, followed her daughter. In an instant grief disordered the features of Claire. Her eyes were sunk in their sockets. Her mouth was drawn, and she seemed on the point of fainting. But the energy of her soul vanquished once again the weakness of her body, and, regarding with tenderness her mother bending anxiously over her :

“It is nothing,” said she; “a little fatigue and emotion . . . But I am already better . . .”

And, in fact, the flush of fever mounted to her cheeks, and her eyes sparkled. The Marquise, whom her daughter had carefully kept in ignorance of the torments agitating her, at this moment, had a vague suspicion that Claire was deceiving her. This union, which satisfied the mother so entirely, would it give to her daughter the happiness that she deserved? Was it with a calm mind and a confident heart that Mademoiselle de Beaulieu had engaged herself? The Marquise, in one second, reflected more than she had done in fifteen days, putting to herself a crowd of questions, to which she could not reply. Accustomed to yield to the will of others,—having suffered formerly from the infidelities of her husband, having bent to the loving despotism of her daughter, submitting in everything,—she had never preoccupied herself with responsibility.

She was like those creatures without character, who accommodate themselves to every situation, not realizing that it is possible to change one's destiny. She had allowed Claire to do all that pleased her. But, at this solemn hour, she asked herself, for the first time, if she had acted with prudence. Very troubled, the Marquise sought for approbation in the eyes of her daughter. And, taking Claire in her arms :

“Thou art happy, my child, art thou not ?” said she . . . “Seest thou ! my *rôle* of mother is ended . . . Thou art going to be mistress of thy life . . . Tell me that I have indeed done all that depended upon me to make thee happy !”

Claire saw in the eyes of her mother the anguish that had seized upon her, and, making a last effort to deceive her, embraced her tenderly.

“Yes, mother darling, thou hast made me happy. Have no fear and no disquietude.”

And as the Marquise, at these words, melted into tears :

“Do not sadden me,” added the young woman in a suffocated voice . . . “One would think . . . ” She did not complete her thought . . . and, nervously clasping her mother a last time in her arms :

“Go,” said she; “we must part . . . Go . . . till to-morrow . . . ”

Madame de Beaulieu, reassured by this apparent calm, regained her serenity an instant troubled, and without the least uneasiness re-entered the salon.

At the same moment Suzanne returned to the apartment of Madame Derblay with Brigitte. The young girl, having little confidence in the adroitness of the faithful

Jurassienne, wished to accompany her, to supply the deficiencies of her service. The sweet child went, light as a bird, circling in the apartment, attending to the smallest details, watching over all. Claire observed her in silence, displeased, distrustful, thinking with irritation that she would have, in the sister of her husband, a watchful companion, whose eyes, enlightened by affection, would not lose one of her palenesses, one of her weaknesses. She saw in Suzanne a family spy; and, carried away by the exaggeration of her feelings, began to hate her.

The young girl removed the veil and wreath of Claire, and delicately turned them in her fingers, pulling out the folds of tulle, rearranging the flowers, visibly tormented by a secret desire, but hesitating to make it known.

At last, advancing towards Madame Derblay :

“My sister,” said she, blushing, “we believe, in our Province, that a flower detached from the wreath of a Bride that one loves brings happiness. I love you very tenderly : will you permit me to take one of these flowers ?”

Claire looked coldly at the young girl ; and, with an abrupt movement, plucking off the garland that adorned her robe, she cast it at her feet, exclaiming :

“If these flowers bring happiness, they are useless to me ! See, there they are ; take them all !”

Suzanne drew back astonished ; the bouquet fell at her feet, and, turning to Claire, her eyes overflowing with tears :

“You seem not to care for these flowers,” said she mildly. “And, never-

theless, it was my brother who gave them to you . . . ”

Claire was troubled by the plaint of the child. She quickly returned to herself. But the rancour of her mood again overcoming her, the hand that she had stretched out to Suzanne, fell cold and listless at her side.

“Leave her, my dear little one,” said at the same time the Baroness to Made-moiselle Derblay. “She needs quiet . . . Do not be grieved, and take your little bouquet. It will serve you as a model, one of these days . . .”

And, showing to Suzanne a smiling face, she led her, reassured and confiding, to the door of the *salon*. Then, returning to Claire, who was still seated, her eyes fixed, without speaking, plunged in her sorrowful thoughts :

“Well ! *Ma chère*, of what art thou

thinking?" said the Baroness. "Thou hast just wounded that poor little one, and very gratuitously! How is it that thou canst not succeed in governing thy nerves? Frankly, listen," added she, trying to make a jest: "If we were leading thee to the torture, to the air of the funeral march in the Fifth Act of *La Juive*, thou couldst not look more depressed."

Claire cast at her friend a glance so full of reproach that the latter became grave in an instant.

"Now, tell me," said she, "what ails thee?"

Claire rose, taking several steps as if at hazard; then, returning to the Baroness, whose hands she clasped with anguish:

"Dost thou not see how much I am suffering? Dost thou not understand that I am going mad? In a moment,

all you who love me, you will have gone. And I shall remain alone in this great unknown house. What can support me, to whom can I turn? All that attached me to the past is broken; all that could attract me to the future has disappeared!"

"Thou afflictest thyself," said the Baroness, "as if thou wert indeed forsaken. Hast thou not always thy old affections? And wilt thou not have new, sincere and devoted? Thy husband is here, he adores thee, have confidence."

The Baroness paused.

At the words, "thy husband," she saw Claire shudder.

"Oh! If thou didst know all that is passing within me!" murmured the young woman. "This marriage that in a transport of revolted pride, I wished

for in spite of everything, now that it is accomplished, causes me horror. That man who is my husband, I wish to fly from him. Stay! Do not leave me, remain here; he will not dare to come so long as thou shalt be with me . . . Oh! that man! That man, who inspires me with the first fear of my life, how I hate him!"

"*Mon Dieu!* But thou dismayest me!" cried the Baroness, really frightened. "Thy mother, perhaps, has not yet left: wilt thou that I call her?"

"No!" replied Claire quickly. "It is from her, above all, that I wish to conceal it. Thou didst see how I was able to restrain myself before her. She must be ignorant of my fears, she must not suspect my despair. Dear mother! It is through love for me, through weakness, that she has encouraged me, that she has

aided me to conclude this marriage . . . If she could think! . . . Oh! no! It is enough that I should suffer! All that has been done, it is I who would have it, I only ought to bear the pain . . . My weakness is without excuse, it is unworthy of me. Be tranquil, it will not return . . .”

And, showing to the Baroness, who was observing her, troubled at the asperity of her voice, at the violence of her words, an impenetrable face :

“Go to rejoin thy husband,” added the young woman, “without misgiving, without disquietude. Embrace me, and let all that has just escaped from me be forgotten by thee when thou shalt have passed the threshold of this room. Dost thou promise me?”

“I promise thee,” said the Baroness. “Till to-morrow.”

And, suppressing a sigh, casting a last glance at her friend, Madame de Préfont left the room, murmuring to herself :

“ Poor Claire ! ”

CHAPTER V.

IN her large chamber Claire remained alone. Her eyes wandered vaguely around her. The apartment was severe and fitted for meditation. The light of the lamps fell softly on the old tapestry with which the walls were covered. It was the admirable series of the loves of Renaud and Armide. Under a tent of purple and gold, the Knight reclined at the feet of the Enchantress, smiling, while raising with an enfeebled hand a large embossed cup. Farther on, the two Knights deliverers were traversing the enchanted forest, thrusting aside, by aid of the magic buckler, the monsters that were attempting to bar their passage.

And finally, under the walls of Jerusalem, in the battle waged between the Christians and the troops of Soudan, Armide, standing in her car drawn by white unicorns, was darting with fury the formidable shafts from her quiver, at Renaud, who was covered by the blood of the Infidels. A marvellous ebony cabinet of the Renaissance, incrustated with coloured marbles, stood in a recess, facing a very handsome four-post bed, in carved pear-tree, surmounted by a canopy of Genoa velvet, with large bouquets of flowers on a maize-coloured ground. An admirable chest of drawers, of the style of Louis XIII., in black wood, ornamented by brass plates, replaced the common and ridiculous commode with shelves. A superb mirror, framed in a border of bronze, very finely cast in the form of leaves, reflected the expiring gleams of

the fire burning on a large hearth of free-stone, in the frame above the mirror was enshrined a remarkable painting after the Spanish school, representing a fair Infanta, constrained in her stiff costume, her chin supported upon a lace ruff, and inhaling with a pensive smile the perfume of a rose. Large sconces of brass attached to the walls, and a Flemish lustre suspended from the medallion in the centre of the ceiling, completed the simple and rich furniture.

Claire remained indifferent to all that surrounded her. She was meditating deeply. While led away by the vehemence of her will, she had deluded herself as to the situation in which she would be placed. She had not thought of what her life would be after her marriage. She had feverishly hastened to conclude it, eager to consummate the act which, in the eyes

of the world, would relieve her from the insult offered by the Duc de Bligny. And here, abruptly, she found herself in the presence of the reality, revealed to her by that room which was to be shared in common with her husband, with a man almost a stranger to her.

Her delicacy revolted at the thought. She had a horror of Philippe. She thought herself mad at having dreamed of this union. She found him unworthy for having lent himself to it. Her confused ideas whirled furiously through her brain. Going to the window she opened it. The freshness of the night slightly calmed her. The moon sailed out from behind the clouds, lighting the great trees of the park. Her disk was reflected in the little lake. All was silent and contemplative. Claire asked herself if it would not be better to disappear for ever in that tran-

quill water clear and profound, rather than to struggle against the repugnant difficulties of her life. She had for an instant the idea of descending to the margin of that water, motionless and sparkling under the rays of the moon, and, with the thought of her only love, confiding herself to its depths, like the pale betrothed of Hamlet.

But the dread of public opinion, that idea of "what will be said of it?" which had already had so disastrous an influence over all her resolutions, diverted her from this desperate act. She smiled bitterly at the thought that Athénaïs would say that she had drowned herself for love of the Duke. Claire shuddered at the sensation that this romantic end would make in her circle. In fact, she did not wish to grieve her relations, nor to inflict upon them the horror almost degrading of a suicide.

She cast a last friendly glance at the water, sleeping and luminous, and, closing her window, went to seat herself near the hearth.

It was over, she well understood it, she no more belonged to herself. She must live, and live united to a man who was about to come armed with his rights, and able to command her, who, till that time, had been always free, always obeyed. She felt at once fear and anger. Her pride protested against the subjection which was imposed upon her. She would not submit to it and sought the means by which she could force her husband to restore her liberty.

She had arrived at dreaming of a sort of married life in which each would remain master of his or her destiny. That Philippe should be faithful, troubled her but little, provided that he was respectful

and submissive. Let him do whatever might seem good to him, on the condition of leaving her mistress of her life. Would it be very difficult to obtain from the Ironmaster, an ambitious man without doubt, a promise to have some complaisance for a woman who had brought into his house a considerable fortune, and caused him to benefit by the commanding influences of her family. He loved her however, she well knew it. But she did not wish to pay attention to that sentiment. With the despotism of a woman accustomed to bend all things to her caprice, she cast aside his love which wearied her, and resolved, if Philippe showed himself exacting, to keep him at bay. She was energetic and high spirited, capable of arguing and contending. She did not doubt for a moment that she could conquer even serious resistance, and did

not once think, in her implacable egotism, of the wounds that she was about to make in the heart of the man who adored her.

The sound of steps, re-echoing in the adjoining room, made her suddenly start. The blood rushed into her face. Incapable of remaining quiet, she rose and, leaning her elbow upon the high chimney-piece, shudderingly murmured : “ It is he ! ”

Philippe, having done the honours of his house to his relations and to his friends, and having seen them leave one after the other, was alone. He went almost mechanically in the direction of his bachelor room. That which he was to occupy with his wife was formerly the chamber of his father and mother. He thought with delicious agitation that, quite near, separated only by a few doors, still more perturbed than himself, in her white toilette, she whom he loved awaited his

coming. He had often dreamed of the hour that would give into his arms this beautiful young girl, and he had trembled with passion. Now he was astonished to find his senses benumbed. Nothing allured him to her. He was grave, pre-occupied and very pitying. His love for Claire had become augmented by a kind of protecting tenderness. He fancied himself called upon to heal that weak heart. And he felt for her the same affection that he had for his sister when she was a child. For himself, he thanked Providence who had accorded to him the possession of the treasure so ardently coveted. And he promised himself to be worthy of the favour that had been shown to him, by assuring the happiness of Claire.

He surprised himself thus in his room, seated in an arm-chair, musing and very

absorbed, half-an-hour after the departure of his last guests. He smiled and thought himself rather foolish. Then rising quickly, he passed into his dressing-room. The large glass of an *armoire* reflected his image, and, seeing himself clad in his Bridegroom's costume, he thought that it would be supremely ridiculous to present himself to his wife in that black coat and white cravat. He put on a morning suit of dark blue, and his heart palpitating, again seized by unutterable emotion, he walked towards the apartment of Claire. Having crossed the little salon, he tapped with the tips of his fingers upon the wood-work of the door, without receiving a reply. Thinking to have sufficiently announced his presence, he entered.

Claire, still in her bridal robe, was standing, dumb, grave, her elbow sup-

ported on the high chimney-piece. She did not turn her eyes towards him, but merely lowered her head, and Philippe saw the thick coils of her fair hair, shining over the nape of her white neck.

He advanced slowly, and, speaking with effort :

“ Will you permit me to draw near you ? ” said he.

With her hand Claire made a sign of assent.

Profiting by her consent, Philippe glided to the couch and seated himself, bending, almost to the feet of the young woman. He regarded her attentively. Her face contracted and hard astonished him. He was acquainted with that expression sullen and menacing : he had seen it when she was in the presence of the Duke. He was disquieted at finding Claire so self-sustained, as if ready for

combat. He could not divine the projects of the young woman, but, instinctively, he foresaw resistance. Wishing to penetrate into this heart so obstinately shut, to have the meaning of the enigma, as much as he had been agitated a moment before, so much he became calm.

This change in the temper of Philippe was alarming to Claire. She could easily have managed a husband perturbed and hesitating. By putting him upon his guard, she restored to him all his clear-sightedness to judge, all his energy to fight.

“For the first time we are alone,” said Philippe, in a low voice, “and I have many things in my heart to tell you. Till now, I have not dared to speak . . . I should have badly expressed my sentiments . . . All my life has been

passed in work . . . Therefore I supplicate you to be indulgent . . . That which I feel, I pray you to believe it, is worth more than that which I say . . . Very often you have seen me come to you, stammer a few words, then keep silence. I was afraid of appearing too bold or too timid . . . And that fear paralyzed me. Then I confined myself to listening to you, and your voice was sweet in my ears as a song. I lost myself in contemplating you, forgetting all to follow you with my eyes when you were walking on the terrace, in a ray of the sunlight. You have thus entered deeply into my heart: I adore you. You have become my sole thought, my hope, my life . . . Then, judge of my intoxication now that I see you here, near me, my own!"

And seizing the hand of Claire between

his, Philippe pressed it passionately upon his burning forehead. Claire moved slightly and withdrew her hand.

“Pray Monsieur . . . ” murmured she with lassitude.

Philippe quickly raised his head, and regarding her with astonishment :

“What ails you ? ” said he . . . “Am I so unhappy that my words displease you ? ”

“Do not speak to me at this moment,” replied Claire with gentleness . . . “I beg you . . . You can see ; my trouble is profound . . . ”

Philippe was moved by the sorrowful accent of the young woman, and sadly shaking his head :

“Certainly yes, you are pale, trembling . . . Is it I who am the cause ? ”

Claire turned away her eyes to conceal the tears that were slowly stealing down

her cheeks, and, in a tremulous voice, answered :

“ Yes.”

“ Reassure yourself, I implore you,” continued Philippe. “ Do you not feel that my only desire is not to displease you ? What must I do to prove it ? Demand it. All will be easy to me. I love you so much ! ”

The young woman thrilled with joy. A glimmer of hope shone through the obscurity in which she was struggling. The passionate ardour of her husband made her understand what boundless power she exercised over him. And, without pity, she resolved to abuse it. She became a coquette, and, for the first time, regarding the Ironmaster with a slight smile :

“ If you love me,” said she, “ then . . . ”

She did not end her sentence. But

made a gesture of authority that Philippe clearly understood.

“Do you desire that I should leave you?” said he, with submission, “is that the proof that it pleases you to exact from me? I shall resign myself to it, if it is your will.”

Claire breathed again with delight. She felt herself the absolute mistress of the man who had caused her so much terror. In an instant her expression changed; and showing to Philippe a radiant face:

“Well, yes,” said she, “it will be a great kindness. The emotions of this day have been too much for me. Tranquillity is necessary to me. I must collect myself. And to-morrow, later, more in possession of my thoughts, more sure of myself, I will explain . . . ”

Philippe remained a moment silent. In

the speech of Claire a few words appeared to him to have a false ring. That perplexing delay seemed to him questionable. There was in it a mystery that he was resolved to unravel.

“What will you tell me to-morrow, or later, that I cannot hear to-day?” asked he. “My life and yours are they not from henceforth inseparable? Our road is traced out. For you to be confiding and sincere. For me to be devoted and patient . . . I am ready to be so, I assure you. Are you of the same disposition?”

The language of Philippe was plain and firm. He looked his wife straight in the face. Fearing to have advanced too fast, she wished to draw back.

“Let me tell you that confidence is not won in a moment,” replied she. “I have only been married two hours. My

life, alas, dates from farther back. In that life, they made me happy. I had the right to think aloud. I was free to keep silence. I have never been forced to deceive. My troubles, and I have had them, you know, my family divined them. They understood that the remembrance of them could not be effaced instantaneously. I have been very spoiled . . . They never asked me to smile when I had a sad heart . . . If I must resign myself to dissimulate with you, for pity's sake, give me time to accustom myself to that constraint."

Claire, with extreme ability had changed the question in order to avoid answering it. She took the position of a victim. Philippe, by insisting, would have appeared cruel. He felt it.

"I pray you, do not add a word," cried he, preparing to meet the sacrifice. "You

do me an injury . . . You will never, believe me, have a friend more tender and more devoted than myself. In marrying you, I have taken my share of your troubles, and I aspire to make you forget them. Rely upon me, I am responsible for your happiness. If the past has deceived you, hope everything from the future. It is far from my intention to inflict upon you my love! What I ask of you, is to let me try, by dint of cares and tendernesses, to win you from yourself. That is all my ambition. And as you require repose, solitude, rest here at home, free and tranquil as you were yesterday. I will retire ; it is that, is it not, that you wish ? It shall be as you desire."

Claire, on hearing these words, was at the same time irritated and disquieted. The Ironmaster showed himself so magnanimous and so great, that all the

combinations prepared in advance to regain her liberty threatened to fail miserably. Philippe, with unexpected goodness, anticipating her wishes, would she be able to live apart from him? He adored her and he aspired to make himself loved by her. How, without injustice and without cruelty, could she perpetually repulse a man so loyal and so generous? The gentleness and the tenderness of her husband would, the next day, render resistance impossible to her without harshness. She understood the danger that she was running, and resolved to escape from it by resolutely breaking all the bonds that united her to Philippe.

The latter, seeing Claire silent and motionless, advanced towards her. He stooped his head, and his lips lightly brushed the white forehead of the young woman :

“Till to-morrow,” said he.

But on breathing the perfume of that golden hair, on feeling under his lips that sensitive flesh, Philippe was seized by a sudden intoxication. He ceased to be master of himself. Forgetting his promises, he thought no more of the susceptibilities of the troubled heart beating so near to his own. He saw an adorable woman whom he wildly loved and who belonged to him. In an irresistible transport, he caught her in his arms, and, his eyes ardent :

“If you knew,” murmured he, “how I worship you !”

Claire, taken by surprise at first, became livid. She bent her figure and, resting her hands upon the shoulders of her husband, exerted herself to avoid a contact that was odious to her :

“Leave me !” cried she with anger.

The clasp of Philippe loosened. He recoiled. And regarding the young woman who was trembling before him, her face disfigured by anguish . . .

“What!” said he in a troubled voice, “you do not even give me the right to touch your forehead with my lips? You repulse me with violence, almost with horror! What is it that is passing within you? It is not merely modesty! . . . It is antipathy! . . . You hate me then? And wherefore? What have I done to you? Stay! Your words of a minute since return to my memory, and now I fear that I better understand them. After that deception from which you have suffered, there has remained more than bitterness in your heart. There is perhaps regret. . . .”

“Monsieur!” protested Claire in a dull manner.

But Philippe had become exasperated. Anger made the blood rush to his face, and walking up and down with agitation :

“ Madame, vague protestations between us are useless. The hour for explanations, plain and frank, has come. You give me, by your attitude, suspicions that you must explain. A woman does not repulse her husband without reasons. To treat me as you do, you must . . . ”

Philippe stopped. His voice was suffocated in his throat, he had become very pale, and his hands were agitated by a nervous twitching. Breathing with difficulty, he turned to his wife in such a way as not to lose a movement of her face :

“ That man,” said he, “ who has forsaken you, do you still love him ? ”

Claire understood that the opportunity

for the rupture so much desired by her had presented itself surely, irremediably. She hesitated, however, to seize it. Philippe, with his powerful and reasonable anger, caused her fear. She stood before him, uncertain, her brows knit, her heart beating, well understanding that her destiny was hanging by a thread.

Her silence ended by irritating Philippe, who, losing all restraint, seized her arm with force, regarding her with flashing eyes :

“ You have heard me ? Answer me !
You must ! I insist ! ”

The hand of Philippe upon the arm of Claire produced the effect of a finger placed upon the trigger of a gun. The shot was fired. The haughty young woman, angered and carried away by that violence, looked fixedly at her husband :

“Well! If it were that?” said she with audacity.

Hardly were these words pronounced when she regretted them. The Ironmaster had become formidable. In an instant he rose to his full height, his face took a terrible expression, and raising his clenched hand, like one of his own heavy hammers :

“Miserable woman!” cried he.

Claire did not recoil a step. She bent her head and let her hands fall with resignation, like a martyr ready to meet death. Philippe saw her, gave a profound sigh, walked hastily across the room, clasped with rage his right wrist in his left hand, as if he wished to break it, to punish it for having raised itself menacingly over the forehead of that adored woman; then, regaining his calmness :

“Now,” said he to Claire, “weigh well your words . . . That which you have said to me ought not to be true! . . . It is impossible! I am dreaming; or, rather, you have wished to put me to a test. It is that, is it not? Oh! Do not fear to own it to me; I pardon you in advance, although you have made me suffer much . . . You must not trifle with a heart like mine; you will know it one day . . . It is a cruel game, I assure you! . . .”

He forced a smile, but his lips remained contracted. Claire continued gloomy and insensible, as if weighed down, with the inertness of a block of stone.

“Speak, then!” exclaimed Philippe, entreatingly. “Say something! You keep silence . . . Can it be true?”

She did not say a word, abandoning herself to the destiny that she had

prepared, feeling vaguely in her conscience that she was committing a sin, but in her implacable pride decided to go to the end. Philippe, struck with stupor, went to the window, and, leaning his burning forehead against the glass, sought to recover a little coolness. He understood that the horrible explanation entered upon with his wife had only begun. He wished to know how far Claire was determined to push her audacious revolt.

He returned to her.

“ Thus, it is with your heart filled with another that you consented to marry me ? After the unworthiness of his conduct, after the affront that he has made you undergo, you love him still ! And you dare to tell it to me ! You gave me your word to be a loyal and faithful wife. This is how you have kept your promise ! And without blushing you placed your hand in

mine ! To what a degree of moral depravity have you fallen ! ”

“ Monsieur, I do not defend myself,” said Claire ; “ is it generous of you to make me suffer ! ”

“ You suffer ! ” exclaimed Philippe. “ And I, do not I then suffer ? I who love you with all the strength of my soul. I who was ready to do all to please you, and who only asked of you, in exchange, a little indulgence and affection. To satisfy your wounded pride, so that the world should not suspect your humiliation, you have sacrificed me, speculating upon my confidence, laughing perhaps at my blindness. Do you know that this that you have done is atrocious ? ”

“ Well ! Have you not seen that for the last fifteen days I have been mad ? ” cried Claire, ceasing to restrain herself.

“But do you not understand that I am struggling in a circle from which I cannot extricate myself? I have been carried on by an irresistible fatality. I must appear to you a wretched creature. You can never judge me as severely as I judge myself. I deserve your anger and your scorn. Stay! Take all that is mine, except myself . . . My fortune is yours, I abandon it to you. Let it be the ransom of my liberty!”

“Your fortune? You offer it to me? . . . To me! . . .” exclaimed Philippe.

He was upon the point of speaking and, in his indignation, of informing her of the ruin that it had cost him so much care and delicacy to conceal. What a vengeance to reap from the haughty Claire! And how sure, rapid, and cruel it would be! He drove at once far from him that thought. He found it unworthy

of him. And, entirely calmed from the satisfaction that he experienced in finding himself so morally superior to the young woman, he was able to look at her without anger.

“In truth,” said he coldly, “are you taking me for a man who sells himself? By marrying you, in your idea, I shall have made a speculation. You deceive yourself, Madame! You think that you still have to deal with the Duc de Bligny.”

The blow struck home, and, starting, as if, in insulting the Duke, he had insulted herself :

“Monsieur!” cried Claire, casting a withering look at Philippe.

But suddenly, as if ashamed, she was silent.

“Well! why do you pause?” continued the Ironmaster with bitterness. “Defend

him, then ! It is the least that you can do for him . . . You are perfectly able to appreciate him. Your conduct altogether resembles his ! . . . Calculation and duplicity, such is your rule, is it not ? Oh ! I see clearly now. You wished to take for a husband a man who was in subjection to you, and you have chosen one who was very enamoured and very confiding. A union with me was a *més-alliance*, but my docility was to compensate for the obscurity of my origin. If, by chance, I dreamed of revolt and of maintaining my rights, you had something with which to make me keep silence . . . A bag of crowns ! And, in fact, what can I say ? The husband of a woman so noble and so rich ! I, a vulgar and avaricious being ! This was your plan ! And when did you avow it to me ? Honestly without doubt, an hour before the ceremony ?

In sufficient time that I might be able to refuse the bargain? Not so! You allowed me to learn it only when I could no longer draw back,—when all was finished, signed, irrevocable; when I am indeed truly your dupe, and when you can no more fear that I may escape you! And I, blinded, not able to see the snare! A simpleton, who had no suspicion of this cruel intrigue! I who came here just now, palpitating, trembling, to make my declaration of love! Was not I more than senseless, more than ridiculous? Was I not impudent and ignoble? For, in fact, I have your fortune,—is it not true? I am paid! I have no right to protest!”

And Philippe, bursting into terrible laughter, fell upon the sofa, concealing his face in his hands. Claire heard, without speaking, this terrible apostrophe.

She was more wounded by the reproaches of her husband than touched by his grief. She did not know the reality; and the truth irritated without enlightening her. She did not understand Philippe's cry of suffering; she only retained the irony of his words.

"Monsieur!" said Claire with haughtiness, "say no more; spare me useless mockery . . ."

Philippe hastily removed his hands, and, exhibiting to the young woman a face deluged by tears :

"I am not scoffing, Madame," said he; "I am weeping over my betrayed hopes, over my lost happiness. But enough of weakness. You wished just now to buy your liberty of me. I give it to you for nothing. Believe that I shall never trouble you. Between us all ties are broken, and we shall have nothing more in common.

Yet, a public separation would cause a scandal that I do not deserve, and that I beg you to spare me. We will live, the one near the other, the one without the other. But as I do not wish for misunderstandings between you and myself, listen attentively to that which I am about to say. One day you will learn the truth. You will know that you have been still more unjust than cruel. And perhaps you will then repent of what you have done. I declare to you that from this moment it will be useless. I could see you kneeling at my feet imploring pardon, and I should not have for you a word of pity. I would have been indulgent to your anger. It will be to me impossible to forget your hardness of heart and your egotism. Adieu, Madame : we will live as you have wished. Here is your room. There is mine. You may

rely upon it that from to-day you no longer exist for me.”

Claire, without pronouncing a word, inclined her head as a sign of assent. Philippe, his heart wrung, cast a last glance upon the young woman, hoping for a reflection, a weakness which would give her back to him at the moment when he was going to lose her for ever. He saw her insensible and frozen. Her eyes had no look, her lips no word.

Philippe crossed the room, opened the door slowly and shut it with reluctance, again pausing to hear if an exclamation, a sob or a sigh might give to him, wounded, humiliated, a pretext to return at once and to offer pardon while there was yet time. He heard nothing.

Then, turning to that door behind which the implacable young woman remained alone :

“Proud creature ! thou wilt not bend,” said he, “I will break thee.”

And taking the way by which he had passed an hour before, his heart so full of hope, he re-entered his bachelor room.

CHAPTER VI.

THE flame of the lamps had become dim. The fire had died out. The large room was in half darkness. Claire, in the same place, standing before the high chimney-piece, sought to collect her ideas. She had emerged triumphantly from the struggle, but felt, however, shattered like one who has been vanquished. A dull torpor overwhelmed her. Her head appeared so heavy that she was obliged to support it with her hand. In her ears was a ringing that deafened her. And before her troubled eyes all seemed to be whirling with frightful rapidity. Her heart beat violently, a cold dew pearled upon her

temples. And she remained inert, suffering horribly, her mind wandering, feeling herself growing faint, and not having the strength to move nor the power to call.

Claire allowed herself to fall upon the couch, but was obliged to rise again immediately. Sharp pains racked the muscles of her legs, and she could not be quiet. She was compelled to walk up and down the room, notwithstanding the heaviness of her head, which seemed to her swelled and empty. Above her left eye-brow she had an acute pain, as if a nail had been driven into her forehead. A dreadful fever throbbed in her veins. And bent double, groaning, so great was her suffering, she moved slowly about the room, sifting over again in her troubled brain the same ideas tormenting and insupportable. Awake, she was a

prey to a kind of night-mare. And she staggered on, now muttering confused words, interrupted by a terrible chattering of the teeth.

She suffered thus for two hours, gloomy, stubborn, not wishing to summon help, fancying that, if she but opened her door, her husband would believe that she was asking pardon, and would return. Confiding, however, in his loyalty, she had not even turned the key in the lock, nor pushed the bolt. A sad conquest to make, alas! One that would have appalled Philippe, for she had changed so terribly, under the influence of the fever that was consuming her, that the only sentiment she could now inspire was that of pity.

The first gleam of dawn found her always walking about her room, to beguile by movement the increasing pains in

her limbs. She dragged herself along, very pale, her eyes sunk, her temples burning and throbbing. She could bear no more. She looked for an instant at the sky, which was becoming red, and wished to open the window, hoping that the pure air of the morning would refresh and calm her. Her failing hand could not turn the fastening, and, giving a low cry, she fell swooning upon the carpet.

Towards nine o'clock, Brigitte, approaching the door cautiously to hear if her mistress still slept, heard a groaning. The faithful servant was frightened, and, without hesitation, entered the room. Claire, extended on the same spot where she had fallen, lay without motion. She was talking aloud in an unintelligible voice. Her face was red and her feet icy. Brigitte, in the twinkling of an eye, without asking herself

how Madame Derblay came to be lying thus upon the floor, still in her bridal robe, raised her like a feather, undressed her, put her to bed as she would a child, and, seeing her soothed by the exquisite sensation of comfort given to her by the freshness of the sheets, she ran to seek Philippe.

The latter was dressed and in his room. With a glance the *Jurassienne* saw the bed disordered, read the sadness upon the face of her master, and, finding near the pillow a handkerchief damp with tears, sorrowfully shook her head.

“Ah! Monsieur Philippe,” said she, “what a misfortune! Here you have been weeping. And she . . .”

The Ironmaster became livid. He trembled. The idea occurred to him that Claire had abandoned herself to some act of despair and that she was dead.

“Well?” interrogated he with a gesture of frightful anguish . . .

Brigitte understood his thought.

“No,” said she; “but . . . so ill!”

Philippe heard no other word. Without giving himself time to put on his coat, running like a madman, he went to the chamber of Claire. Upon the carpet, her white robe, crumpled skirts, little high-heeled shoes, and corset of perfumed white satin were thrown in disorder.

Crimson, her eyes shining under their half-closed lids, Claire was lying in the large four-post bed. Grave, holding their lances the warriors on the tapestry seemed to be watching over her. Philippe could approach her; she did not recognise him. She was smiling gently, and her parched lips left visible her white teeth. He took her hand and found it burning. A profound torpor succeeded to the incessant

agitation of the night. Philippe was dismayed: he wrote promptly for the best doctor at Besançon, for whom he sent a carriage. At the same time, he summoned the family from Beaulieu.

He installed himself at the bed-side of Claire, plunged in distressing thoughts. Was she to die, and would all be ended? She was lying motionless, her eyes open now and crossed. She was frowning, and, from time to time moaned, carrying her hand to the nape of her white neck. She suffered horribly: it was visible. And delirium seized upon her, becoming stronger as the minutes passed on.

All the rancour of her husband fell before this sad spectacle. Superstitious for the first time in his life, Philippe thought that, if Claire recovered from her malady, it would be a sign that they, he

and herself, would end by becoming happy. From that hour, he had only one idea : to save her. He still adored her madly, notwithstanding all that she had made him suffer, because of it perhaps. Philippe passed — seated at the foot of the bed — two of the most cruel hours of his life, which had, however, already known many trials. The arrival of Madame de Beaulieu and of Octave was to him an immense relief. He felt himself discharged from a part of the responsibility. The Marquise, stupefied and appalled, was happily silent. She raised no violent outcries, shed no torrents of tears and did not invoke the aid of Heaven. She discreetly interrogated her son-in-law, prescribed a few elementary cares, and pale, grave, remained near her daughter, who did not even suspect her presence. Octave, boiling with impatience and uneasiness,

took a horse and started after the others to meet the doctor.

Towards mid-day, the latter arrived. He was a man still young, formerly house-surgeon at the hospital, very learned in the progress of therapeutics and perfectly competent to write a prescription or to distinguish a serious illness. Besides, there was no occasion for clairvoyance to discover the malady. It made itself known by delirium, by pains at the nape of the neck, and in the forehead, by the contraction of the bilateral. He interrogated the pulse and counted one hundred and twenty pulsations. The thermometer, placed under her arm, marked forty degrees. The fever was of extreme intensity. The doctor shook his head and murmured these words :

“ Very serious ! ”

And as the mother, the brother and

the husband questioned him anxiously with a look, he added :

“ Meningitis . . . ”

Leaning over the white chest of Claire, in which a broken respiration was sounding painfully, he listened long and carefully. Then, rising :

“ Some little trouble at the heart, the result of a very grave nervous condition . . . You must send immediately for twelve leeches and some ice.”

Suzanne, who was listening from the threshold of the room, made a sign to Brigitte, and the servant ran off to seek them. The poor child had waited for two hours in the salon, trembling, agitated, suspecting a terrible event, and not daring to enter. She glided near the bed, not speaking, that the idea might not occur to them of sending her away, holding her breath and gazing with

terror at the red face and pale lips of Claire. It seemed to her that they were suffocating in that large room. And, without asking, guided by that instinct which makes of all women good sick-nurses, she went upon the tips of her toes to open the window. The doctor glanced at her, smiled, and said :

“Very good.”

Philippe, who had not even seen his sister, so much was he absorbed, turned towards her with saddened eyes ; and, not being able to restrain himself, he stretched out his arms to her, bursting into tears. The nerves of the poor fellow had been greatly tried in the last twenty-four hours. Suzanne mingled her tears with those of her brother ; and, leaning upon his shoulder :

“Fear nothing,” murmured she, “between us two, nothing can happen. We will save her ! ”

But, if Claire was to be saved, it would not be by Suzanne. Philippe asked of his sister, as a great sacrifice, to consent to return to her convent. The Ironmaster distrusted the delirium of the young woman. She was talking with terrible animation, and the name of the Duc de Bligny was incessantly returning to her lips. She appealed to him with rage, overwhelming him with reproaches, and openly showing the cruel wound that the desertion of her lover had made in her heart. Philippe also appeared to her in her hallucinations, but always under a menacing form. He came prepared to strike her, after having killed the Duke. She saw blood upon his hands, and supplicated him to send her to rejoin him whom she loved.

If Philippe, mute and immovable, was obliged to listen to these words of mad-

ness, at least he wished to leave Suzanne in ignorance. He had sufficient confidence in the future to spare his sister the knowledge of his misfortune. He deemed that this present grief would one day be effaced, like a bad dream. There must not, then, be the shadow of a painful recollection between Suzanne and Claire.

Suzanne, weeping bitterly, but obeying as always the orders of her brother, left for Besançon, under the escort of the faithful Brigitte. And Philippe remained alone in his house, in complete possession of the adored invalid. The Marquise, from the first moment, on seeing with what decision, what sagacity, and what attention her son-in-law fought every phase of the malady, left him free to act, and confined herself to assisting him with her presence. She passed all her days in the room of her daughter. At night,

Philippe installed himself in an arm-chair near the bed, and, in the subdued light of a lamp placed on a side-table, he watched.

The delirium did not cease. Vainly, the husband saw, while turning pale, the blood of Claire flowing drop by drop, along her charming throat, tracing a red furrow upon her white skin. The madness, that had taken possession of this poor enfeebled brain, continued to agitate it. Days and nights passed; the fever still held sway, extending its ravages. The face of the young woman became emaciated; her hollow cheeks sank over her teeth. Her limbs, incessantly moving, tossed painfully within the folds of the sheets. And a murmur of indistinct words, so great had become her weakness, could be heard in the shadow of the curtains.

One only lucid thought was persistent

in the brain of Claire. She had the consciousness that, during the time she was lying there, Athénaïs would be married. By a kind of second sight, the day even when her rival ascended triumphantly the steps of La Madeleine, covered with flowers through the ostentation of M. Moulinet, at the exact hour when the crowd entered the church in the footsteps of the newly-married couple, Claire awoke to perception. A glimmer of reason passed into her eyes; she raised herself and, in a very distinct voice, said:

“It is at this moment that they are being married, and I—I am going to die.”

The Marquise, who had approached her, tried to speak to her, to deceive her, but she would hear nothing. Delirium again seized her. She had a terrible relapse, screaming, tossing her arms, her lips

parched by fever, perspiration trickling from her beautiful, entangled hair. Philippe, terrified, sent to seek the doctor, who was not expected till the evening. The latter discovered a fresh elevation of the temperature of the body. The arteries, like pipes in which the steam is over-heated, were ready to burst. One stage more, and it would be the end.

That day was horrible. Philippe awaited in mortal anguish the issue of the crisis. He felt that his life was being decided during these interminable hours. In his head, shattered by fatigue and grief, this thought was incessantly turning, immutable as a decree: "If she lives, we shall end by being happy." He believed it, and he would willingly have given his life to prolong that of the dying woman.

The evening at last came, and the

transient quiet that the night habitually brought to Claire had not yet been produced. With brows knit, with teeth clenched, always calling the Duke in heart-rending accents, the poor woman was extended in her disordered bed. Philippe had risen and was hanging over her, believing that she could not see him. The eyes of the patient opened, and, filled with horror, fixed themselves upon him.

She made an effort to raise her arm and, in a hollow voice :

“ You have killed him,” said she ; “ are you waiting to kill me also ? ”

Philippe, heart-broken at seeing himself so cruelly misconstrued, exhausted by so much watching, became, in an instant, weak as a child. He leaned his forehead upon the carved wood-work of the large bed and began to weep bitterly. Slowly

his tears fell one by one upon the burning brow of Claire. It was like a healing dew. It seemed that these tears, torn from the heart of Philippe, were a sovereign philtre. The features of the young woman relaxed. She sighed gently, turned with difficulty to the side as if to listen. Philippe was sobbing in the shadow, unrestrainedly, close to this being without reason. A hand placed itself upon his, and, at the same time, the feeble voice of Claire murmured :

“Who is weeping near me? Is it thou, mother?”

The Ironmaster raised his head, and saw the eyes of Claire directed towards him. He drew near. The young woman recognised him. A painful shade passed over her face, as if she remembered. A tear glittered in her sunken eyes, and stretching out her hand towards the

man to whom she had caused so much suffering :

“ Oh ! Is it you ? ” said she . . .

“ Always you, generous and devoted . . .

Oh ! pardon ! Philippe, pardon ! ”

The Ironmaster fell upon his knees and passionately kissed those eyes which, for the first time, had regarded him without anger. The young woman smiled sadly, then a painful contortion gave back to her face its terrible hardness, and delirium again seized upon her, and she began to babble words without connection.

For three weeks she had been between life and death. This crisis was the last. From that night, the malady took a fresh turn. Her violent agitation gave place to an insurmountable torpor.

“ Comatose period,” said the doctor with tranquillity. “ We have done hitherto all that we could to make Madame

Derblay sleep : now we must do all that we can to arouse her.”

Philippe well understood that Claire, save for a relapse or a new complication, was out of danger. But, with the hope that she would live, the grave care of deciding his future existence came to him. So long as his wife was in peril, he had thought only of fighting with death. Now he must begin to fight with life.

Claire, recovering her reason, would, very probably, recover her dislikes. In the prostration of her illness, she had been moved to tenderness, and, in a moment of weakness, had asked pardon. Restored to the possession of her reason, would she still show herself humble and submissive?

Philippe had learned to understand the haughty character of his wife. He dreaded a return of her intractable pride. He trembled at the thought that she might

believe he had determined to profit by her convalescence to break the compact made in that terrible night of the wedding. If he appeared to fail in dignity by withdrawing from the engagements made by himself, and of his own accord, he would sink in the eyes of Claire, and for ever. Harshness, then, seemed to him necessary. And, with the strength of will that he possessed, it was certain that he would not depart from it. He had sworn to himself to break the pride of his wife. He was prepared to keep his oath.

They were in January ; the winter had been cold. The work at the Foundry, partly suspended during the acute period of the malady of Claire, had resumed its activity. The sound of the hammers ringing upon the anvils gladdened the young woman. Her long convalescence was very sweet. She took up life again

with delight, and felt a deep joy in gazing upon all that surrounded her. The large apartment, severe and a little sombre, with its panels in old tapestry, and its antique furniture, pleased her much. All was calm, harmonious, and reposeful. Before her bed, upon the hangings, a nymph, with flowing hair, was pouring from an urn that she bore upon her shoulder a stream of water which spread itself over the plain, and became a river. It seemed to her that this beautiful figure formed an allegory, and that from her pitcher gracefully inclined she was pouring out to Claire life.

Through the large windows she saw the trees of the park, still covered with snow, glittering in the sun. The birds came to beat the panes of glass with their wings, as if to demand shelter. She gazed at them with pleasure and had bread thrown

to them. She took an interest in everything. Strength returned to her by slow degrees, and she experienced keen enjoyment in feeling herself born again physically and morally,—she found herself at ease in her home. Stretching herself idly in her bed, resting for hours listening to the tic-tac of the clock, without an idea in her head, lost in an exquisite void.

She passed the whole of her days alone with the Marquise. Philippe now came only twice, in the morning and in the evening. He inquired scrupulously after her health, asked if he could procure anything for her that she required. And, after having remained five minutes seated at the foot of her bed, he gravely withdrew. And Claire listened to his footsteps losing themselves in the distance. Looking forward to his visits, and finding them

too short, she began to feel slightly irritated with him.

She met with an opportunity of being angry, and improved it with the freedom of a child. She had a fancy for having flowers in her room. The hot-houses of Beaulieu were full of them. One morning the Marquise arrived, her arms filled with a bunch of lovely white lilac. When Philippe presented himself Claire was inhaling the fragrant blossoms. He gently observed that the perfume of flowers might cause much harm to his wife, and, taking the bouquet, prepared to carry it into the salon.

"But I assure you that I feel quite well," said Claire with vivacity, "you can safely leave me these flowers . . ."

"You are like all convalescents," replied Philippe smiling, "you exaggerate your strength . . . We must think for you . . ."

“I must indeed be well, as you risk contradicting me,” replied the young woman, pouting and with a face full of coquetry. “When I was really ill, you were altogether different.”

Philippe became immediately very grave, and, without answering, he bent on Claire a sad and severe glance. The young woman sighed, and, in an altered voice :

“You are right,” said she, “take away these flowers. I thank you.”

That day she was very pensive.

By degrees she regained the power of reflecting. In her strengthened brain, the remembrance of the past returned. She began to examine herself upon it, and was astonished at not finding in her heart the smallest trace of her love for the Duke. As an unripe fruit, her tenderness for him had fallen. She felt no more hatred even for Athénaïs. Claire commiserated her,

foreseeing that she was destined to suffer from an incurable envy. She did not inquire about the marriage, but supposed it was accomplished. Those around her carefully avoided pronouncing the name of Bligny. A useless precaution. She would have heard it without emotion. Her heart had become whole.

Her convalescence was very long. When she tried to rise for the first time, she fainted, and was again consigned to her bed. Philippe, anxious, reappeared at her pillow and nursed her with the same devotion, impassible and silent. She suffered always in the forehead. It seemed that she had some persistent disorder in the meninges. On shaking her head, she said that she felt her brain moving painfully, like the clapper of a bell.

“I was always a little mad before my

illness," added she smiling. "What shall I be now?"

She had been married exactly five months, when, one lovely day in April, she was able to walk in the garden, supported by her mother and by the excellent Brigitte.

She slowly made the tour of the lake, stopping from time to time to regain strength upon the stone benches warmed by the sun.

Seeing her walk thus with feeble steps on the gravel paths of the flower-garden, it would have been impossible to recognise the proud and haughty young girl of whom her mother said: "She should have been a boy." Her features were thinner and softer, her eyes shone more mildly. She had become womanly, and, no longer having the same superb and haughty carriage of the head, she seemed smaller.

From this day the attitude of Philippe changed no more. Gentle, amiable and kind to Claire in the presence of strangers, he was cold, polite and grave when they were alone. His conduct was so skilfully calculated that, to his surroundings, he passed for a model husband. The Marquise had not the least suspicion. She was habituated to the calm and correct politeness of the husbands in her world. And besides the Marquis de Beaulieu had not spoiled her by his effusiveness. She found that the household of her daughter went on admirably, and considered herself discharged from all superintendence. Completely reassured as to the health of Claire, she announced one morning her intention of leaving for Paris, where her son Octave, since the month of January, had been established. Faithful to his theories of equality, the young Marquis had prepared

to “throw his coat of arms to the nettles” and to make for himself a good practice as a barrister.

Claire was therefore left alone with her husband. She saw him at the hour of meals. After having dined, he led her to the salon, sat with her five minutes, then rose, said “Good night” to her, and retired to his study. One evening she had the curiosity to see what he was doing there; and from outside, in the darkness, well covered by a cloak, she watched him. Claire saw upon the curtain of the illumined window, his shadow pass and repass, to which the play of the light gave gigantic proportions. He was walking up and down without cessation, slowly, as if pensive. Claire re-entered the Château, and gained, upon the tips of her toes, the room adjoining his study. She seated herself in the obscurity, regarding the line

of light which passed from beneath the door, and listening to the regular steps of Philippe sounding dully upon the thick carpet. He walked in this way till midnight. Then, when the last vibrations of the clock were lost in the silence, she heard him open the door of his room, and the streak of light disappeared.

Of what was he thinking during that prolonged and almost unconscious walk? What thoughts absorbed him during those solitary hours? Claire would have given much to know.

Having the desire, she was not a woman to restrain herself for long, and one evening, when Philippe was taking leave of her as usual :

“What are you doing,” said she, “alone, shut in, so far into the night?”

“I am setting in order the accounts

in arrears," tranquilly answered the Ironmaster. "And, stay, precisely, I have some money to give to you."

Thus speaking, he drew from his pocket a roll of bank-notes.

"Money?" exclaimed Claire with amazement . . . "for me?"

"The income from your fortune for six months . . ."

And Philippe, placing the notes upon the table, added coldly:

"Will you examine, I beg you, if the sum is correct?"

Claire took a step back; a wave of blood rushed to her face, her heart beating, her hand trembling:

"Take it again, Monsieur," cried she . . . "Take it, I pray you . . . I cannot accept this money . . ."

"You must accept it, nevertheless," said the Ironmaster; and, with a dis-

dainful gesture, he pushed the notes towards the young woman.

The latter stood erect, ready to struggle. The gesture and the accent of Philippe stirred her to the lowest depths of her being. Her eyes sparkled; and in an instant she was again the haughty and violent Claire of former days.

"I will not . . ." began she, fixing her eyes boldly upon her husband.

"You will not?" repeated he with irony.

Their looks met. And that of Philippe was so firm, so direct, so powerful, that the young woman could not sustain it. Her resistance slackened suddenly; her hand proudly raised fell to her side and, vanquished, she kept a pained silence. The Ironmaster bowed without speaking, and left the room.

For the first time, Claire had measured

her will with that of Philippe. She came from the collision stunned and shattered. She was forced to acknowledge the superiority of her husband's character, and she experienced an irritation mingled with joy. She conceived for him a profound esteem, and, strongly attracted by that energetic nature, set herself to study him attentively. In the expansion of her return to life, she had resolved to be kind, and to bestow a frank friendship on Philippe. She discovered with vexation that she had determined to grant more than was asked of her. When she was ready to go as far as friendship, her husband stopped at indifference. He did not sulk. If he had done so, she would have had a remedy. He did not occupy himself at all about his wife, leaving her to live in her own way, as she had demanded of him, and showing to her an icy coldness. Claire,

humiliated by this rather scornful inattention, bent her wits to combat it. She was essentially warlike. It was necessary for her always to have a difficulty to conquer.

When Bachelin came to dine at Pont-Avesnes, Philippe spent the evening in the salon. The young woman invited the Notary twice a week regularly. She began to play at whist, and took dummy, like a dowager. Before Bachelin, the Ironmaster chatted, played, but, the guest departed, again became severe and silent. Notwithstanding her efforts, she gained no influence over the mind of her husband.

The power of Philippe over himself exasperated Claire. Alone in her chamber, she yielded to violent anger, and shuddered at finding herself vanquished. That man was her master. He led her as it pleased him. And when she tried to

revolt, with a look he knew how to bring her back to submission. She saw him cold and hard as the iron that he worked. He hammered the character of his young wife, and it was evident that he would do so, at his will, to give to it the form that should please him. Claire wept from shame at discovering her powerlessness. A last remnant of pride permitted her to hide her torments from Philippe. She showed herself at that time such as she ought to be, resigned without bitterness and dignified without rigidity.

However, if she was indifferent to that which was passing far from Pont-Avesnes, those of her relations who were in Paris did not allow her to forget. The Baroness, as soon as she knew that her friend was restored to health, wrote to her, with an intermittent frequency, letters full of inco-

herent, but curious details. Through her, Claire had tidings of the Duke, of the Duchess, and of M. Moulinet.

Athénaïs had made her entry into the world with noisy brilliancy. She generally pleased the men, but had unchained against her all the women, by her free and hoydenish manners. The Duke, however, paid no attention to her. Three months after his marriage, he passed for being separated from his wife, as much as it was possible to be. He was laying siege to the beautiful Comtesse de Canaille, an Irish woman with blue eyes, deep and troubled as the sea. As to the Duchess, she was flirting with half-a-dozen young men of fashion with waved hair and irreproachable shirt-fronts, without whom she was nowhere seen. She called this little phalanx of gallants "her team of six." She guided it with a sure hand,

never risking being overturned. Besides, the hardness of her heart and the coldness of her temperament put her out of danger of a surprise.

Moulinet, since he had disembarrassed himself of his daughter, seemed to be ripening considerable projects. He had engaged a secretary, and shut himself up every day for many hours, in a handsome room of his apartments, named by him his library, although it did not contain a single book. He had laid there, upon a large writing-table, a treatise on Political Economy. And his daughter pretended that from the hours of two to five, he slept over it conscientiously. The Baroness was assured that the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce was preparing for some candidatureship. They had met him, said she, with people of mediocre appearance, who could only be journalists.

Finally, he had made many excursions into the Jura.

He had built a lay school in his commune, and, secretly, was restoring the church. With his left hand he caressed the Radicals, and with his right flattered the Conservatives. This manufacturer of chocolate showed himself Machiavelian.

The truth was that, late in the day, M. Moulinet felt himself bitten by ambition. He thought that, having so well managed his own affairs, he would excel in directing those of others. And he asked himself if in the *Chambre* there would be a single man who could prop a political situation upon a fortune more considerable than his. He owned frankly that there was not. And, having bought a husband for his daughter "all that there was of the best," he thought that he ought not to hesitate

in purchasing for himself a *mandat électoral*.

He wavered for some time between the *Sénat* and the *Chambre*. Senator! The title appeared to him very majestic. He had preserved a kind of fetichism for this body, formerly composed of the most eminent men of the country. But, on the other hand, Deputy did not sound badly. And the *Chambre* seemed to him more lively, more stirring. With his quick wit, he understood that he would find there enough mediocre people to make it easy for him to speedily become an important man. And he began his campaign, decided to recoil before no sacrifice in order to assure his success.

It was to plant his first landmarks that he had gone to La Varenne. His district was adjacent to that of Besançon and to that of Pont-Avesnes. The influence

of M. Derblay ought to be great in the country. He resolved to conciliate him. He went to visit the Ironmaster, and was sufficiently cunning, to show himself as a good-natured and agreeable man. He did not drop a hint of his projects, but announced his return to the Château for the summer season, and found means to make Claire believe that he was more simple than badly disposed, and that, in the affair of the marriage, he had only been the unconscious agent of Athénaïs.

At the same time, Moulinet started at Besançon a journal at one sou, entitled: *Le Courrier Jurassien*, and destined to support his candidateship. The chief editor was one of those individuals of ordinary appearance, who had been seen with the late Juge de Commerce. He had engaged the most presentable. And

the latter having offered him a number of political convictions to select from, Moulinet chose a good little Republican opinion, floating between the Left Centre and the Right Centre—sufficiently dark for the excited, sufficiently light for the timid—something like the words of the *Marseillaise* to the air of Queen Hortense.

However, the colour of his candidature troubled him but little. As a decisive argument, he relied upon his purse, and he was not wrong. The projects of M. Moulinet displeased extremely the Duc de Bligny. The latter thought that his father-in-law, having known how to gain so handsome a fortune, ought to have no other occupation than that of letting *him* enjoy it. He opened the subject to Moulinet, with that slightly impertinent familiarity, which was the habitual tone

of his conversation with the late Judge at the Tribunal de Commerce.

“What fly is biting you to make you rush into politics?” asked he . . . “Do you not think that our affairs are going badly enough? What a singular desire have quiet people to thrust themselves gratuitously into the fray! Do you know that the electors will be perhaps stupid enough to nominate you?”

“But, my dear Duke, I quite expect it.”

“We shall see what it will cost you.”

“What is that to you?”

“It is much to me! I married an only daughter, and here are you intending to give her a sister.”

“A sister?”

“Certainly a sister: politics! And a sister who will have many children: all your brokers, agents, coadjutors,

patrons, supporters, without counting the electors who are all going to emulate each other in devouring you, and God knows where it will stop !”

Moulinet made a majestic gesture, and striking the pocket of his trowsers, through a deplorable habit of which he could never break himself . . .

“My son-in-law, my means permit me every caprice. I am only sixty. I might divert myself with ballet girls . . .”

“I should not consider that a crime ! At least, those are follies that I understand ! A small foot, a pretty ankle, a round waist, imprisoned in the golden belt of the Égyptiennes in the ballet of *Faust*, and the black or blue eyes which seek you in the orchestra stalls, delightful ! That is worth the trouble ! If you would like me to present you in

the green room of the ballet, I will introduce you there. But, to make declarations, to offer bouquets, and to give an income to Marianne? Monsieur Moulinet, you afflict me seriously. Let us see, allow yourself rather to go to the ballet girls!"

"I am grieved, my dear Duke, but I am a moral man! I prefer politics . . ."

"Great good will they do! When you shall be nominated, will you speak?"

"It is very probable . . ."

"That will be very lively! I will go to hear you, and I will take there some friends . . . But try not to become a Minister: you will end by compromising me!"

Moulinet, disdaining the banter of his son-in-law, pursued the completion of his plans. He went at the commencement of spring to establish himself at

La Varenne and began to work the electoral cause.

The Marquise, at about the same epoch, returned to Beaulieu, and Suzanne had been recalled from her convent by her brother. Claire had not been a stranger to that event. The young girl brought a little animation into the house, and unbent apparently the relations between the husband and the wife. Philippe was obliged to act a comedy before Suzanne, and to show himself tender towards his wife. He acquitted himself perfectly of that task, and did not allow the smallest suspicion to spring up in the mind of the young girl. She thought her brother entirely happy, and did not recognise Claire. The proud and gloomy *Maiselle de Beaulieu* had become simple and smiling. Suzanne loved passionately her beautiful sister-in-law, and found in

her an affection careful and sweet, which was at once that of a mother and of a friend.

The youth of Claire, curbed for a little time by her anxieties, her cares, and chagrin, returned vigorous as the sap of a tree. The two sisters never left each other. Suzanne, from the day of her arrival at Pont-Avesnes, re-commenced her visits to the houses of the workmen. Claire accompanied her everywhere, like a benevolent fairy. She took without scruple the money that Philippe had given to her, and made use of it for the relief of the unhappy. They might be met on foot in the roads of Pont-Avesnes, simply clad, sheltered under their large sun-shades, followed by the red rough-haired dog of Philippe, and all heads were uncovered as they passed.

In a few months, Claire became the idol of that population of workmen. They busied themselves much about her in their cottages, at the time of her marriage. They were well acquainted with her, having formerly seen her pass on horseback, indifferent, absorbed, thinking of the Duke, absently touching her hat, from which floated a long veil, with the pommel of her riding-whip, when they saluted her. It was said that she was proud. And, in their language familiar and a little malicious, the workmen called her "the Marquise," like her mother. Having become Madame Derblay, she still remained the Marquise. To all these men she seemed a being of a superior race. She was so fair, so refined, so elegant even in her dark woollen gown, that, in the muddy streets of Pont-Avesnes, or upon the thresholds of the decayed houses,

she appeared like a young sovereign, and they adored her.

Octave, in the month of July, came to Beaulieu, and then their diversions began. Suzanne and Claire in a small basket carriage that the latter drove very skilfully, the Marquis on horseback. In the woods of Pont-Avesnes there were delicious drives. Under the gloomy vault of the tall trees, over the sweet-crushed grass, they went slowly. The carriage followed, swaying from side to side, the deep tracks hollowed out by the carts of the wood-merchants who performed the annual lopping. Sometimes they were compelled to alight. Octave pushed the basket carriage, while Suzanne held the head of the horse. The mare of the young man paced quietly after Claire like a lamb, gazing at her with great soft eyes, and stretching out her neck

as if to ask for the accustomed lump of sugar.

Those were happy days. Claire forgot her sorrows. But, in the evening, when she found herself alone in her large room, she was deeply depressed. She had spoiled her life and without remedy. She now knew enough of Philippe to understand that he would never return to her. He was faithful to the compact concluded between them. He had restored to his wife her liberty, and left it entirely in her hands. With what delight she would have sacrificed it to him ! Impetuous and haughty, she had to deal with one stronger than herself. Claire now experienced a bitter joy at feeling herself vanquished. A man had come who, placing his hand upon her shoulder, had humbled her. It was he whom she loved, through even that which he had done to make her feel

the weight of his will. He was her master.

In the long hours that she passed alone, she reproached herself grievously at not having, formerly known, how to discern the superiority of the man whom she was to marry. She now saw how grand was his position in the country. Each day, she discovered with astonishment, another of the numerous sources of his fortune. Before the return of Suzanne to Pont-Avesnes, she was totally ignorant of the existence of the Iron-works in the Nivernais. She adroitly interrogated her sister-in-law, and learned with surprise that her husband was on the way to become one of the Princes of Commerce, that ruling power of the century.

She was ashamed of herself. It was to such a man that she had offered her fortune, as an indemnity for the wrong

that she had done him! What was her fortune, compared with the vast capital of the Ironmaster? A drop of water lost in a lake. She felt that her pride had been at the same time odious and ridiculous, and, imagining that Philippe must despise her, she was sensible of violent affliction. She knew, nevertheless, how to conceal it, with admirable strength of soul.

Yet, in spite of herself, the tenderness that she had for Philippe betrayed its presence in small particulars. She welcomed him with a joy which sparkled in her eyes, her looks were only for him, and she was ingenious in doing all that she could to please him. Suzanne, from her overflowing affection, was precious to her.

Upon the terrace, one day, after breakfast, when the young girl was amusing herself by gently passing a stalk of wild-

oats over the throat of her sister-in-law, Claire caught Suzanne round the shoulders and drew her towards herself. Philippe, with the most indifferent air, was slowly drinking a cup of coffee, following with his eyes the flight of the swallows, which with shrill cries were pursuing each other in the blue sky. Claire took the head of the young girl between her hands, regarding her with tender eyes ; then sighed, and, gently pressing her lips upon the light curls waving on the forehead of Suzanne :

“Dear child,” murmured she, “how much thou resemblest thy brother !”

Philippe had heard. He started. Never had anything so direct gushed from the heart of Claire to his own. He rested an instant immovable, then, without pronouncing a word, withdrew. Madame Derblay wiped away a tear from her eyes.

Suzanne cast herself upon her in a fury of affection :

“ You are weeping,” said she, “ you are weeping ! What ails you ? Oh ! speak ! . . . You know how much I love you . . . Has Philippe given you pain ? It would be without intending it, and it would suffice to say but one word to him . . . Shall I tell him ? . . . ”

“ No ! ” replied Claire quickly, forcing herself to smile. “ I am a little unnerved . . . Philippe is perfect, and I am very happy,” added she seriously, gazing at Suzanne, as if to make that conviction enter more profoundly into the mind of the young girl. Then, rising :

“ Let us take a turn,” said she gaily.

And they went into the park, running like two wild creatures, and laughing as if nothing had passed.

This was one of the last relatively

happy days of Claire. The following morning, the Duke and the Duchess de Bligny arrived at La Varenne.

The announcement of their presence displeased Claire. She hoped never to have seen them again. She remarked that Philippe observed her with more attention, and forced herself to make her face unchangeably calm. The same evening, after Suzanne had retired, Philippe opened a discussion as to the intimacy to be maintained with the inhabitants of La Varenne.

“The Duc de Bligny is your nearest relative after your brother,” said he in a tranquil voice. “No apparent rupture should take place between him and your family. You must even study to preserve the good understanding there was at the time of our marriage. I do not think that it would be easy to-day to modify

that course of action. If the Duke and the Duchess de Bligny present themselves here, I am of opinion that we must receive them as your relations, that is to say, warmly. If we do not welcome them, we expose ourselves to comments that I desire to avoid. Yet I do not claim to impose upon you my way of seeing it. You are more interested than any one in this question. Tell me what are your wishes, I will comply with them."

Claire remained for a moment silent. The fresh intervention of the Duke and of Athénaïs into her life appeared to her to be the signal of greater dangers. She had an instinct that misfortune complete, irremediable, would enter with them into her home. She was upon the point of speaking, of opening her heart, of asking pardon, perhaps, but did not dare, and

rashly accepted all that Philippe had decreed.

“We must welcome them, you are right,” said she, “and I thank you for imposing on yourself this constraint. The presence of the Duke will be to me as painful as to you; I pray you not to doubt it.”

Philippe made a sign with his head which might mean either yes or no, and the conversation ended.

END OF VOLUME II.

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